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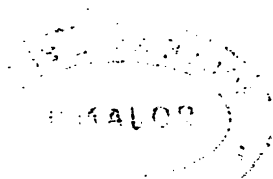
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MOLLIE DARLING.

A Novel.

BY

LADY CONSTANCE HOWARD,

AUTHOR OF 'SWEETHEART AND WIFE,' ETC., ETC.

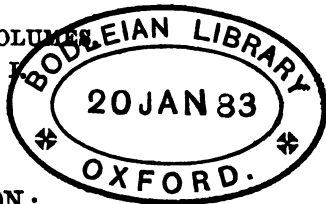
'I must leave you, Mollie darling,
Tho' the parting gives me pain ;
When the stars shine, Mollie darling,
I will meet you here again.

Oh ! good-night, Mollie, good-bye, loved one,
Happy may you ever be ;
When you're dreaming, Mollie darling,
Don't forget to dream of me.

Mollie, fairest, sweetest, dearest,
Look up, darling, tell me this—
Do you love me, Mollie darling?
Let your answer be a kiss.'

W. S. HAYES.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. I.



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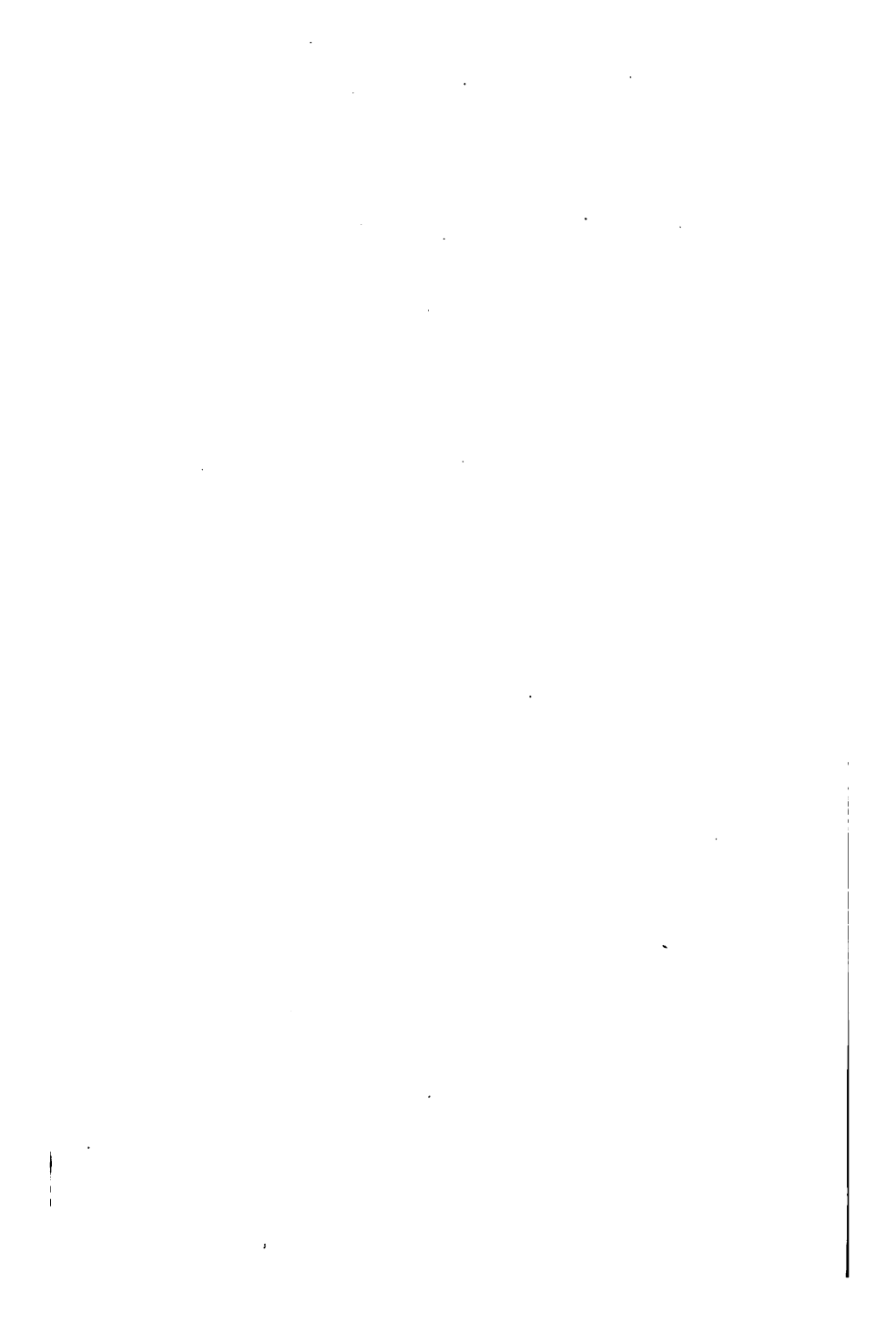
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To the Memory

OF MY

DARLING AND ONLY BROTHER,
GEORGE WILLIAM HENEAGE,
VISCOUNT MAIDSTONE,

Whose memory in my heart and life will never cease until my life ends with it, I dedicate this book, in loving remembrance of him who played so beautifully the song from which it derives its title (it was the last thing he ever played), and who first taught me to love and care for it, as I never have for any other song in the world, his favourite, his delight, 'Mollie Darling.'

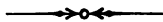


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MOLLIE DARLING.



CHAPTER I.

THE INSEPARABLES.

‘Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety.’

SHAKESPEARE.

‘MOLLIE! Mollie! Mollie!’

This in despairing accents; each ‘Mollie,’ as it left the well-formed lips of the handsome boy who uttered this heart-rending appeal, sounded more distressing than its predecessor. Four more ‘Mollies!’ sounded through the still summer air. The whole scale of agony had been rung, every note

struck, and the said notes, with a determination, a power of echo, worthy of a better cause, had, as they echoed unanswered, gone to swell the immense list of unheeded appeals and questions as numerous as those asked in this our day in 'ye House of Commons, under ye enlightened rule of ye Prime Minister of England, ye people's William, ye people's friend—ye Right Honourable William Ewart Gladstone.'

Following the example of 'ye Feller of Trees,' who does not answer unless it seems good to him, so, too, Mollie, whoever or wherever she might chance to be, turned two deaf, or at any rate irresponsive, ears to the repeated assaults on the cognomen which Providence, in conjunction with 'her godfathers and her godmothers,' had bestowed on her 'in her baptism.' Truly a waste of Christian names, if Mollie was to be allowed to treat it in such a cavalier

fashion. What was to be done? Ay, young sir, that is a question, a problem that has puzzled, 'many a time and oft,' older, wiser brains than those contained in the head covered by your bonnie brown locks.

One thing only was certain : Mollie must appear, and that at once, clothed and in her right mind, and so appearing, render a true, detailed, most particular account of her day's proceedings, since her energetic caller—with a persistence worthy of a better cause, and a strength of lungs that would have made the staff of the Consumptive Hospital green with envy and despair, so hopeless would it have been to attempt to enlist his sympathies even as an out-door patient (unless, indeed, the hospital was for the speedy consumption of things 'the best of which' were good enough for him)—had elected to favour her with a remembrance of her name, and to

state her special reasons for not responding that call.

‘ I have it ! ’ suddenly exclaimed the mysterious voice ; and clear down the breeze, in rich sweet tones, came a low soft whistle, and a very distinct ‘ Laddie ! Laddie ! ’ made itself heard.

No use, silence reigned supreme.

‘ Where on earth can she be gone to ? ’ now growled the voice, beginning to wax impatient. ‘ I’ll try one more dodge, and if that don’t bring her, may I be whipped ! ’ grunted the voice.

After a lapse of a few moments, in cheery joyous accents, the following was heard :

‘ If I had a sister and she wouldn’t come,
Wouldn’t I wallop her, oh, what fun ! ’

And then came the sound of what was first cousin to a ringing box on the ears. After a judicious interval a man’s face peeped out between the leaves of a thick

laurel hedge. Such a handsome face, with its big brown eyes, sun-burnt skin, and eyelashes that swept the cheek, good nose, and weak mouth ! On one side of him a trout stream ; on the other side of the hedge there was a quaint old-fashioned garden, with box twined into queer shapes, old-fashioned flowers, and a great sun-dial in the centre, marking the swift, ever-changing course of time.

‘It is the last straw that breaks the camel’s back ;’ and what a politely uttered ‘Mollie’ had failed to effect, the impertinent song addressed to her credit entirely accomplished, and Mollie appeared on the scene, cool, sweet, unkind, impertinent, altogether charming. A tall slight girl, fresh with the freshness of her nineteen summers, and ‘bonnie’ with the vitality that a pure country life, with simple tastes and amusements, always gives to those who pass their

days in the open air, and who get plenty of 'beauty sleep' every night of their happy, glorious lives ; a wealth of red-brown hair, like bronze flecked with gold, such as one sees in Paris Bordone's picture in the National Gallery, in thick curls all over her small head, pushing themselves in the most becoming and impertinent manner, in a wreath of waves and crinkles, round the broad white forehead and into the deep-blue laughing eyes, in whose depths the devil of mischief seemed resolutely seated—(nothing would eject that imp from the site where he had elected to hold his court)—a figure like a young oak, so firm and upright, and a tender loving mouth—such was Mollie Adair in the opening dawn of her youth and beauty. What a face it was—mutinous, provoking, tempting ! Such a girl would never weary men—there was too much variety about her, and too

much tact, for such a thing ever to be possible. She wielded her power skilfully, and knew right well wherein it lay.

‘Geoffrey, you vulgar, most impertinent specimen of a boy—and that is saying a great deal—what do you mean by shouting out my unlucky name until the hills and dales resound with my fame? I have a great mind to——’

But what Mollie had a great mind to do history does not say, for a loving hug from Geoffrey took away her breath, and for the moment stopped all flow of eloquence.

‘You dear old thing,’ coolly retorted Geoffrey, ‘the end justifies the means. I thought you were never coming, and I wanted you dreadfully for a hundred things.’

‘I never knew the time when you did not,’ retorted Mollie; ‘there never was such a baby as you are, Geoff;’ but

though Mollie tried to look severe, it would not do, for she could refuse nothing to the brother who was her adoration.

Mollie, so firm, so determined in all else, was as wax in the hands of her brother. His will was her law, but he was devoted to her; and as he was very delicate he needed all his sister's loving care: he was a good son and a devoted brother, an excellent shot and a first-rate horseman. He stood a capital chance of being spoilt by his sister, who was wrapt up in him, but his naturally charming disposition had up to now prevented this.

'Why, you blind old bat,' she continued lovingly, smoothing her brother's ruffled locks with a gentle hand as he lay at her feet on the soft warm grass, 'I was not ten yards from you all the time that you were using up your energies in ill-treating my poor name. By the way, I am the proud

possessor of another name—"Diana;" I beg you will address me as Diana in future, not "Di"—that is a degree of familiarity I could not permit. Why did you not use your eyes as well as your voice? It was a shameful abuse of the gifts Providence has given you, only to use one of your talents in your search for me.'

'I knew you would turn up in time,' returned Geoffrey; 'bad shillings always do'—giving his sister a pinch as he spoke—'so I was under no immediate anxiety about you; in a short time I should have considered it my duty—and you know I never neglect that—to call Terence and Joe, and have the stream dragged for your sweet body; and when found should have had you cremated, and worn you for ever in that ring with the ruby heart, on which my covetous eyes have long rested with affection.'

‘Horrid creature!’ responded Mollie, giving a shiver at this wholesale sacrifice of herself, not to speak of her ring.

‘Well, you know,’ said Geoffrey, ‘we could easily replace you; after all, you are not out of the common. Listen to a catalogue of your common-place charms: item—one nose, of rather an inquiring disposition, though kept in its place by judicious pulling from me—what you would do without me my imagination fails to think; item—one mouth, with two lips like cherries, and a quaint little tremble at the corners when I make you laugh or cry; item—one forehead, nothing particular—thank God for that! except that it would be boundless as eternity, and to some people as indefinite and unmeaning, were it not for that merciful interposition of Providence, your curls; item—two ears, like juvenile donkeys’; item—two eyes, ahem! not so bad, the latter

particularly ahem ! But I will spare your blushes, at least, those that ought to be there, but that are conspicuous by their absence ; and conclude my inventory by the observation that, like the "Heathen Chinee," your smile it is childlike and bland.'

At this absurd speech Mollie laughed heartily, and no wonder, for Geoff looked ridiculous with his straw hat tilted over his eyes, and his arms folded like the statue of Napoleon, while in the gravest tones imaginable he uttered his epitome of Mollie's charms.

'Come along,' she said, 'and feed Laddie;' and as Mollie spoke, she picked up a large wooden bowl full of juicy bones that she had brought with her for her favourite.

'Allow me,' said Geoff, with a bow

worthy of Sir Charles Grandison, 'to relieve you of your burden.'

And Geoff took the bowl from Mollie's hands, and so, with his arm round her waist, and hers round his neck, they sauntered along to the old Manor House, which was their home, on the left of which stood a group of walnut trees. Under these lay a huge sleek deerhound, with a skin as smooth as satin, and an intelligent face. He bounded to meet Mollie, whose especial property and care he was, and received with delight his meal of meat and bones.

'Where are all the others?' said Mollie.

'Dispersed like the wind,' responded Geoff; 'gone to the four quarters of heaven. Who knows? Perhaps they may elect to remain there.'

'I hope not,' said Mollie. 'What

ould we do without father, and others who shall be nameless ?'

'What indeed ?' said Geoff.

'Let's go and look for them,' replied Mollie ; and accompanied by Laddie, off they went in the direction of their dear old home, that they love with a true affection.



CHAPTER II.

EARLSTON MANOR.

'Aye, there in truth they are, the quiet homes
And hallow'd birth-spots of the English race ;
What finds he like to these afar who roams ?
Tall trees o'ershade them, creepers fondly grace
Lattice and porch, and sweetest flowers embrace
Each rock and pathway.'

ELBERT.

A BEVY of fair maidens, with a patriarch amongst them, and a little woman whose expression is an embodiment of the proverb 'still waters run deep.' The room is all that is old and charming. Oak everywhere, in all possible and impossible places the ceiling is traversed by beams of it ; the oak seats fixed in the embrasures of the

windows make pleasant resting-places, on which the eyes of any tired guest would rest lovingly; the floor is paved with it; the chairs and sofas are so slippery that if you are not very careful, you and the floor will soon be on intimate 'lying' terms, for you will be sprawling the whole of your length upon it in undignified and doubtful repose; even the fireplace is of it; and as to the firewood, well, in winter big logs of oak shed a happy and comfortable warmth over all. Huge bowls of rare old Crown, Derby, and Worcester, filled with roses of every hue, shed their colour and beauty and fragrance over all; at the windows are curtains of 'heaven's own blue,' with great boxes outside framed in ivy, Banksia roses, and a red wealth of Virginia creeper; these are heavy with the perfume of mignonette and roses which fill them, and they are responsible in the day-

time for the sad intoxication of many an otherwise industrious bee, and at night are the trysting-place of quiet brown velvety moths, that flit lazily and happily, in a perfect sense of their own safety and repose, over the sweet promise of love and delight that each glorious blossom holds for them.

Far away, on the garden side to which the oak room looks, fades an interminable distance of hazy hills, now blue, now violet, anon pink and red-brown ; while over all hangs the summer sky, tremulous with the kisses with which the daylight has kissed its good-bye to the daytime, and celebrated the lovely birth of night. Is there anyone who has loved a home and lost it, who will not echo my feeling, when I say that the love of scenery is only second to the love we feel for the individual man or woman who sums up the total of our exist-

ence. Ah! what it is to have had, or to have lost, a home such as this one! Like Queen Mary, to many the names of homes like these will be found engraven on their tried, patient, longing hearts; if not satisfied in this world, surely such love for what a good God has sent us must be satisfied, lost in fruition in the next. Otherwise, were it not for this belief, heart, health, endurance, belief, alike must fade away in one gigantic, hopeless despair.

By the window, tall, stately, beautiful, stands René Adair, with her blue-black hair and her glorious figure, her dark eyes flashing back liking for liking into the eyes of her lover, who is beside her, handsome Talbot Molyneux; next to them, winding a skein of wool, 'Reine Margot,' properly speaking Marguérite, of medium height, slight and straight as a poplar, fair as a lily, with her deep blue eyes, lovely nose and mouth,

and masses of silky hair; then Lettice, her twin sister, like her in all save that her hair was brown, and that she was slighter; and then the youngest, the spoilt darling of all her sisters, bright with her hue of health and vigour, rich in golden hair and brown eyes, sweet, gracious, winning Doris Adair. She gave promise of being a comfort to all, if only the spoiling process was not carried too far. It will be a pity if it is, a shame to nip in the bud such a rich promise of fair flowers. In spite of her vigour, at times she looked so fragile that it seemed that, if the wind blew too roughly, she would shiver and die: she was made to be petted and protected. She had a way of nestling close to people when she was in any trouble that was very touching to see, and which fascinated them.

A group of fair English maidens, truly; and where can you find anything sweeter

or more beautiful? The 'Patriarch,' as his daughters lovingly called him, was Sir Villiers Adair, father of all these lovely girls, and of Geoffrey and Mollie. His 'threescore years and ten' sat becomingly on him, his white hair bearing abundant testimony to his time of life. Aye, dear sir, when the summons comes, and you go forth to meet it, as you will do gallantly, flinching no more than you did from the cannon's mouth (for have you not led a pure and blameless life, as much as any human being can?), we shall grieve with a grief that will know no earthly consolation, for we shall never look upon your like again.

Look at the small specimen of humanity perched on a stool at Sir Villiers' feet—an atom of a woman, the veriest fairy in existence. What a quaint, delightful face; the tiniest mouth, the most impertinent re-

troussée nose (if it goes on being of so inquiring a nature, in its search after knowledge it will some day depart after some question which will never be answered, and so it will be for ever lost to mortal ken), two brown eyes, the embodiment of flirtation, very fair hair, cut short all over the head like a boy's, and a heart of sterling worth, whose pure gold is not to be estimated; tiny feet, thrust into shoes with enormous buckles, and cased in wonderful red silk stockings; a cigarette between her lips, a glass of brandy-and-soda by her side (Sir Villiers, what can you be thinking about?); a marvellous costume, in which red and white checks, that are great-grandfathers to a chess-board, fight for a much-desired prominence, and you have Vivienne Keene Standish, at your service. She was the proud possessor of a very huge husband and a very tiny daughter, both of whom be-

lieved and delighted in the little witch with a simplicity refreshing to see. How, without any evil, she humbugged her better half! She would tell him amazing tales of her own virtues, and laugh at her neighbours' shortcomings in a way that was simply delightful. As for her lovers, their name was legion. Verily, a whole army; yards of them in every quarter of the globe, from veterans with grey hair, who ought to have known better, to apple-cheeked, beardless boys of seventeen; and it was a matter of grave conjecture which age was the most devoted to her charms.

‘Trust her not; she’s fooling thee,’ ought to have been sung to them, separately and collectively, all day long; but it would have been just the same if the song had resounded in their ears from morning to night: they did not want to learn better. Vivienne Standish and folly were prefer-

able to all the wisdom of that doubtfully (?) excellent man, King Solomon of sainted memory. You would only waste your breath on Vivienne's admirers.

At the moment that Mollie and Geoffrey enter, Vivienne is sipping her B.-and-S. with an air of infinite contentment, born of the excellence of the beverage, iced to a turn as it is, and the undeniable comfort of her present surroundings. She looks up at Geoffrey with a saucy glance; he is constant, at once her oldest and her latest victim.

'How dare you approach me, sir,' says Vivienne, 'after your desertion all the afternoon? What have you been doing? Where have you been?'

'Ask Mollie,' replies Geoffrey. 'I am so tired,' he resumes, 'screaming after Mollie, wasting all my valuable time and breath on her, that I doubt whether I shall

ever recover. Give me some of your beverage,' pleads Geoffrey.

'Certainly not,' replies Vivienne with decision. 'The only person who shares my "nectar" is my worse half.' And with a bewitching smile she offers her B.-and-S. to her husband.

'Bother Norman,' says Geoffrey, now quite out of humour; 'he has always got you to spoon. At least you might let me quench my thirst. You are very greedy, I think.'

'Merci, monseigneur,' responds Vivienne, getting up and making him a courtesy alike dignified and provoking. 'For your pert speech,' Vivienne goes on, 'you shall not sit next to me at dinner to-night. Sir Villiers, I feel that it is a necessity to my well-being to have Norman next to me at your hospitable board, *vice* Geoff the reprobate, deposed.'

‘An unfair advantage,’ growls Geoffrey, ‘when you know that my father never refuses you anything.’

‘Therefore I made my request to him,’ retorts Vivienne. ‘I ought to have been a general; I have such a talent for upsetting my enemies’ plans,’ pointing to Geoffrey as she spoke.

She looked so comical as she did it, that Geoffrey did not know what to do. He was divided between a desire to look dignified or to laugh; finally, the latter gained the day, and he laughed heartily at Vivienne’s absurdities.

‘Am I not to have any tea?’ mildly inquired Mollie at this juncture. ‘There are limits to everyone’s powers of endurance, and I am so thirsty, I feel as if I could drink the sea.’

At this appeal Margot turned to the tea-table, with its old china and silver, and

poured Mollie out some tea, with thick yellow cream.

René, Mollie, Margot, and Lettice were all old enough to be out; Doris alone was still in the schoolroom, though her emancipation was not far off.

Geoffrey was just three years older than Mollie, being twenty-two; René was twenty; the twins, seventeen; Doris, sixteen; and Mollie nineteen. Their mother died when Doris was seven, therefore they have hardly known that inestimable blessing, a 'mother's love;' but their father, with Miss Lamb, the governess, and their old nurse, who had been with them since their father's marriage, did all that love and affection could for them; and the result was that a more affectionate, unselfish number of girls it was impossible to see. They were loved alike by rich and poor. Vivienne was Sir Villiers' niece—her

mother was his only sister—so that her familiarity with Geoffrey was excusable.

‘I shall go to tea in the schoolroom to-morrow night,’ said Vivienne.

‘So shall I,’ replied Geoffrey.

‘Oh no; that you will not,’ retorted Vivienne. ‘You are counting your chickens before they are hatched. Miss Lamb will never allow such a breach of decorum as your presence in her sanctum.’

‘We shall see,’ replies Geoffrey, with a twinkle in his eye. ‘Come, Vivienne, I will bet you a kiss against my pearl pin, that you want so much, that I sit next to you at tea at 5.30 p.m. to-morrow.’

‘A kiss, indeed!’ retorts Vivienne. ‘Surely, “much learning has made you mad.” Don’t you wish you may get it?’

‘Well, well,’ says Norman, coming to her rescue. ‘Consider my feelings,’ he continued, ‘at such a cool proposal. You

incorrigible member of a small, but otherwise respectable society, in a well-ordered country house, how can you dare so coolly to make such a proposal to my wife? I ought to call you out.'

'Possibly,' replies Geoffrey; 'but "coffee and pistols for two" is, I flatter myself, not to your choice or liking; so I think I am safe. Besides, cousins have privileges that even the present Government have not dared to interfere with yet, though they are audacious enough for anything.'

All laughed at incorrigible Geoffrey, and Mollie gave him a fond look which seemed to say, 'Your nonsense sounds pleasantly in my ears.'

And so it did; for if ever brother and sister loved each other, these two did. They had done so all their lives, ever since they could remember, and by their family

were called 'the inseparables.' God help them if a separation ever comes !

After a little more chaff they dispersed to dress for dinner. Half an hour later the doors in the Cedar Passage opened one by one, and the guests gradually assembled in the oak-room.

There were some additions to those we have already seen, in the shape of Colonel Treherne, Captain Lindesay, and Mr. Aylmer, who had been expected all day, but only arrived in time to dress.

True to her word, Geoffrey was banished from Vivienne's side ; but he revenged himself by sitting opposite to her, and tormenting her from a safe position. René and her devoted slave, Sir Talbot Molyneux, Mollie and Colonel Treherne, Hugh Lindesay and Margot, Norman Keene Standish and Miss Lamb, Sir Villiers and Vivienne, and Geoffrey and Tiny Aylmer,

Bruce Aylmer and Lettice, made up the party.

Geoffrey revenged himself by a desperate flirtation with Tiny Aylmer—in plain English, Phyllis Aylmer, now corrupted into Tiny—who seemed well pleased with his attentions. And Vivienne, not to be behindhand, took Bruce Aylmer, who was sitting on her other side, under her protecting wing. Doris is not yet allowed to dine downstairs ; but is consoling herself upstairs with the thought that, ‘only a year,’ and she, too, will taste the delights of ‘coming out.’

Dinner over, they all dispersed into the garden. Soon the group took the form of small parties of two. A fragrant scent of newly lit cigars was wafted pleasantly on the light breeze ; a murmur of voices, the chink of coffee-spoons,

‘And the beating of their own hearts
Was all the sound they heard.’

Bruce Aylmer and Mrs. Standish have established themselves very comfortably on a low garden-seat, and are enjoying a quiet flirtation, much to Norman Standish's amusement.

'Was there ever such a little woman?' he murmured, looking at his wife with admiring eyes. He was so sure of her truth and devotion to himself, that he could afford to let her amuse herself as seemed best to her. And he is right. She will never give him cause to regret his confidence.

Hugh Lindesay and Margot have disappeared entirely. He is a capital fellow, rich in this world's goods; and the acquaintance begun in London seems likely to ripen into something 'nearer and dearer.'

Sir Talbot and René are enjoying their Fool's Paradise, for their engagement has received her father's cordial approbation;

and, indeed, he is worthy, with his old name and unblemished reputation, to be the husband of imperial René.

Lettice is curled up at her father's feet, listening to him whilst he talks with Norman Keene Standish and Miss Lamb; and Mollie and Colonel Treherne are holding an animated discussion on the respective merits of their favourite poets and painters.

Doris is asleep. Ditto Mignonne, Vivienne's child. And Tiny Aylmer is walking up and down, in 'maiden meditation fancy free.'

All are accounted for but Geoffrey. Suddenly a deep rich voice rings through the summer stillness, as Vivienne and Bruce, tired of their seat, walk up and down under the drawing-room windows, she looking up into his face with a queer, coquettish little look, he bending over her with an air of extreme solicitude.

Geoffrey sees and grinds his teeth, for he has been in love with Vivienne ever since he can remember. She is only twenty-one—a few months younger than he is ; but she never would believe in his love for her, and only cared for Norman Standish. This, however, has not altered obstinate Geoffrey, and he still worships at her shrine with a persistency worthy of a better cause, and she treats him as if he was a mere baby. The voice is Geoffrey's. What does he sing ? Only a parody on Hood's ' Song of the Shirt : '

 ' Flirt ! flirt ! flirt !
Till the night is merged in morn ;
 Flirt ! flirt ! flirt !
Till the frame is tried and worn.
Smile, and whisper, and glance,
Glance, and whisper, and smile
Till her part is played, and she leaves the room
 To dream, we hope, of her guile,
Till her part is played, and she leaves the room
 To awaken, we hope, to her guile.'

 ' Dear me ! ' [says Vivienne, resting both

white arms on the window-sill and looking full at Geoffrey; 'how savage you look. May I inquire whether that tirade was intended for Tiny Aylmer, who is out there pacing the gravel with weary steps, looking like "Patience on a monument." "He cometh not—he cometh not; I'm a-weary—I'm a-weary. Would that I were dead!" etc. Go and console her, Geoff; it is really shameful of you to neglect your guests in this off-hand fashion.'

'No, it is not meant for Tiny,' answers Geoffrey savagely, coming to the window and taking Vivienne's two hands in his firm clasp, 'but for you, Vivienne.'

Bruce Aylmer has discreetly walked off, and left the two to fight it out as best they may.

'Much obliged, I am sure,' says Vivienne. 'I am flattered by your opinion of me.'

‘Why do you torment me so?’ says Geoffrey, his whole face expressive of the affection for his cousin which he is bound in honour not to show—at least not in words.

‘Because it is good for you,’ answers Vivienne. ‘You are silly enough already; if I were to encourage you you would be worse. Now, be a sensible boy; don’t glare at me in that despairing fashion, but learn to behold me in the light of a cousin who is very fond of you in a “cousinly way,” but nothing more.’

‘At any rate, plain speaking is one of your virtues, Vivienne,’ answers Geoffrey.

‘It is best so,’ gently answers Vivienne.

She has always liked Geoffrey, and his devotion to her has been constant and unchangeable. If it had not been for her Norman, who knows what might have been? But Geoffrey will not ever have

the consolation of knowing that next to her husband, his bright ways, tender care of, and great love for her, have at last found their way into the little flirt's real heart. True wife as she is, she will never let him see it. And Vivienne holds out her hand to say good-night to Geoffrey.

‘Just one kiss!’ he pleads.

‘Not for all the world!’ answers Vivienne, drawing her hand away hurriedly. ‘Geoff, you forget yourself.’

And she turned away and walked quietly down the path and joined the others, and nestled herh and into her husband's, as a child might do, and so by a mute action asked for the love and protection that she knew were so surely hers.

Half an hour later all were asleep at Earlston except Mollie, who was unusually restless, and Geoffrey, who paced up and

down his room, a prey to the affection which was part and parcel of his life, and which would continue as long as that life lasted.



CHAPTER III.

THE SCHOOLROOM TEA.

‘ Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast,
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round ;
And while the bubbling and loved hissing urn
Throws up a steaming column, and the cups
That cheer, but not inebriate, wait on each,
So let us welcome peaceful evening in.’

COWPER.

5.30 P.M.—Tea in full progress in the schoolroom at Earlston. What a meal it was ! No one could resist the good fare spread out before them, even if they had partaken of a ‘ Sunday lunch,’ the most appalling meal in creation.

Cunningly shapen twists of bread ; scones and tea-cakes ; golden yellow pats

of butter ; heather honey ; inviting-looking concoctions of pastry known as 'sudden death' ; thin slices of ham and white chicken ; green mounds of mustard and cress ; a singing kettle ; a large teapot of fragrant tea ; sugar, and jugs of delicious thick yellow cream, so thick that your spoon would stand up in it.

Gathered round the board were René, Mollie, Margot, Lettice, Doris, Vivienne, Tiny, Mignonne, Sir Villiers, Norman, Captain Lindesay, Talbot Molyneux, Bruce Aylmer, and last, but by no means least, Geoffrey, true to his word, next to Vivienne. At the head of the table sat Miss Lamb, Doris's good, kind governess.

'You see, I am here,' whispers Geoffrey to Vivienne, as he takes his seat with an amount of assurance that does him infinite credit. 'When will you pay me my bet ?'

'Never !' Vivienne indignantly replies.

‘*Qui vivra verra!*’ coolly responds that incorrigible youth. ‘I shall appeal to Norman.’

‘Better not,’ says Vivienne; ‘or yours will be a short shrift and a sure one. Take my advice for once, and don’t be rash.’

‘It’s your fault,’ growls Geoffrey; ‘you are such a tease. What will be the harm of what I ask?’

‘Harm or no harm, it is forbidden fruit—out of your reach,’ says Vivienne.

‘You need not remind me of that fact,’ replies Geoffrey.

And Vivienne, glancing at him, sees that his bright face is overcast and gloomy.

‘*Mignonne,*’ says Vivienne, ‘come here; I want you.’

The child is a duplicate of her mother, and unless she suddenly grows very much, she will never attain to a great height. In

Geoffrey's eyes she is perfect, and the child is devoted to him.

'Go and give Geoffrey a kiss for me,' whispers her mother.

And the little thing runs up to Geoffrey and kisses him with hearty goodwill, though her attentions are strongly flavoured by jam. 'Elle n'est pas la rose, mais elle a vecu près d'elle.' So even for small mercies Geoffrey is content.

'Where is Colonel Treherne?' says Mollie.

'Here,' answers a voice, as Colonel Treherne opens the schoolroom door and walks into the room to join the merry party.

'You don't know my sister Doris?' says Mollie.

Doris holds out a small hand, which his big one quite covers.

Lancelot Treherne is a man of thirty, very good-looking, and a favourite with all

who know him. He is favoured by this world's goods, and is blessed by having no relations. Sweet Doris Adair attracts him as no one has yet had the power to do since he laid Joyce FitzHerbert in her grave—his love, who was to have been his wife.

Since her death he had wandered in many lands, only going to his old home in Sussex at stated times, to see that all was right. He had no wish, no desire for home ties—that was sacred to the memory of his first love, and until this moment he thought all such joys were things of the past for him : but now, since he has touched her hand, and looked at the fair face by his side, he feels that, child though she is, Doris Adair has a power over him that he cannot deny. And this in a short half-hour. He thinks with pleasure that fortune has doomed him to spend his time in her society for some days to come.

Just then Miss Lamb left the room to give a message.

‘Do you remember,’ suddenly said Doris, ‘that horrid Miss Marsh whom Geoff would always call “Sour Kraut,” that I had before dear Miss Lamb came?’

‘What a woman she was!’ said Mollie.

‘I will describe her,’ said wicked Doris, ‘sisters all! She was as stiff and as hard as her own backboards, a veritable type of the “Anglaise pour rire.” Tall, gaunt, thin, with a nose like a parrot’s, a cruel mouth, and a set of false teeth; I know they were false,’ said Doris, ‘because I went into her room one night when I ought by rights to have been softly slumbering hours before, and I came upon her suddenly, and saw her in the act of putting them carefully away for the night. My delight, and her rage, I shall never forget; and though it is years ago, my ears still seem to tingle

from the sharp slap she gave them : a warning to me not to be too curious in the future about my neighbours' affairs. Her hair was scanty, done up in tight little corkscrew curls, and always adorned with a *bandeau* of black velvet and coloured beads ; she had a lean scraggy neck, and a figure chiefly remarkable for angles. Her dress usually consisted of a blue *barège* skirt and a red Garibaldi, huge collar and cuffs, a profusion of sham jewellery, white cotton stockings (not too white), and shoes down at the heel ; such was the lady who had the honour of imparting knowledge to my youthful idle brain. I am afraid I worried her life out of her : that I was a sort of imp in petticoats ; but she did not understand me, and was hard and unkind. I had such a joyous sense of living—the very fact of existing was enough for me. I thought the world so beautiful, everything

in nature so grand. I felt I should learn so much more from that book always open before me, from watching the birds, and animals, and flowers, than I ever could from so many pages of some dry old lesson book, which I had to commit to memory every day. Luckily all things have an end ; and at the end of three years Miss Marsh departed. I know,' continued Doris, 'I behaved very badly when she left ; hardly waiting until she was out of hearing to begin a perfect war-dance of delight at having at last got rid of her. In this I was helped by Geoff ; and we executed a *pas de deux*, much to our own satisfaction and the intense amusement of the sedate butler and " Jeames " of the imperturbable countenance, who witnessed our performance.'

Everyone laughed at Doris's description, as well they might.

'Ah ! that old lady, she was what our

American cousins would call “a caution!”’ said Geoffrey; ‘thank Heaven!’ he ejaculated piously, ‘that she is an institution of the past, the only one I do not wish to see preserved. In spite of all my tricks and Doris’s also, before she left Miss Marsh had grown as round and as plump as a pillow tied round, what by courtesy was called her waist, with a string—

“She was as fat as fat could be,
The like of her size I never did see,”’

sang Geoffrey, in the exuberance of his recollections.

The schoolroom was a pleasant room: it had deep windows, with cushioned seats, comfortable chairs, a huge sofa, plenty of books and flowers, several birds, and a large tiled fireplace.

But it was getting late, and Mignonne showed unmistakable signs of sleep. Vivienne took her up and carried her off,

which was the signal for a general dispersing of the company.

The next morning early Geoffrey was going to Windsor to rejoin his regiment, and he would return in a few days at the most, and bring with him one of his brother officers—his particular friend, Sir Fitzroy l'Estrange. They were both in the Grenadiers.

‘Come, Mollie,’ said Geoffrey, ‘one turn round the garden; I shall be gone to-morrow before you are up.’

‘Not so, fair sir,’ answered Mollie.

The next morning saw Mollie at her post when Geoffrey came down, and she kissed her hand to him as he drove away in the early morn.



CHAPTER IV.

IN MAIDEN MEDITATION, FANCY FREE.

‘A rosebud set with little wilful thorns,
And sweet as English air could make her.’

TENNYSON.

Geoffrey would risk the fate of Lot's wife as he started by turning back to get a last glimpse of Mollie. Very bewitching she looked, with the bright morning sun lighting up the waves of her hair and smiling into her great eyes. Her simple blue dress became her well. One hand held a basket of roses and jasmine, the other shaded her eyes so that she might get a last look of Geoffrey before a turn in the road hid him from her sight. So Geoffrey remembered

her many years after : never had the love between brother and sister been stronger than it was at that moment.

The days passed quickly away in the ordinary pleasant routine of a country house such as Earlston. At last the day arrived when Geoffrey was to return, bringing with him, for the first time, Sir Fitzroy l'Estrange.

‘ Only two hours more, and they will be here,’ thought Mollie ; ‘ I think I will go and sing, to while away the time.’

Off went Mollie, and opening the piano in the drawing-room, she began to sing. She possessed that good thing in a woman, that gift much to be desired, that enviable talent—a rich contralto voice, made more perfect still by careful well-chosen training.

‘ Sae true his heart,
Sae smooth his speech ;
His breath like caller air,
His very foot has music in it,
As he comes up the stair.’

So sang Mollie, and Mrs. Cockburn's song, 'There's nae luck about the house,' had never been better sung. Just then a carriage drew up at the front door, and out of it jumped two gentlemen. They were Geoffrey and his great friend Sir Fitzroy L'Estrange, with whom he had been staying at Windsor.

'Welcome to Earlston at last, old fellow!' said Geoffrey.

'Thanks, Geoff!' replied Sir Fitzroy; 'I know you mean what you say.'

'Where have they all disappeared to, I wonder?' said Geoffrey. 'Putting on their war-paint, I suppose. That's Mollie singing,' he added suddenly; 'hasn't she got a stunning voice?'

By which sentence it will be seen that Geoffrey found the Queen's English inadequate to convey his meaning, and therefore resorted to the 'Slang Dictionary.'

‘What a lovely voice!’ exclaimed Sir Fitzroy; ‘why didn’t you tell me of the treat in store for me?’

‘I thought I had,’ answered Geoffrey. ‘But come along, and make Mollie’s acquaintance.’

So saying, he led the way to the dining-room. But Mollie was too quick for them; she had heard them coming, and was suddenly attacked by an overpowering fit of shyness. ‘No,’ thought Miss Mollie; ‘Sir Fitzroy may wait until dinner-time to be presented to me.’ And as they entered, they found the drawing-room empty, tenanted only by silence, and a faint perfume of *Ess bouquet*, which bore unmistakable testimony to the fact of Mollie’s late presence there.

‘Little monkey!’ said Geoffrey; ‘she’s up to some mischief again. She is always playing me some trick.’

And he related to Sir Fitzroy how Mollie had kept him waiting a few days before, the best part of one afternoon, dancing attendance upon her goodwill and pleasure. Truly, she was a provoking Mollie; you never knew which way to take her—she was always the exact opposite of what you expected. If you expected to find her in tears, the most laughter-provoking, absurd Mollie, with fun in every glance of her roguish eyes, in every curve of her sweet mouth and chin, confronted you; if, on the contrary, it was Mollie with a keen sense of the ludicrous that you needed, then a young lady approached you whose expression was Puritanical in its severity, and whose sad-coloured garments would have done justice to a Puritan or a Quaker. Either might have laid claim to them. According to Mollie's humour, so did she

dress. When fortune smiled upon her, white, pink, blue, all had their turn ; when the reverse side of the picture was in the ascendant, then greys, quiet browns, were Mollie's delight. Had she lived in the fourteenth century, she would have rejoiced in such colours as 'Colour of Mortal Sin,' 'Vanished Ape,' or later on in 'Flea's Thigh,' or 'Flea's Back,' favourite shades of grey in 1775.

'Come along, Fitzroy,' said Geoffrey ; 'it is no use waiting for Mollie. You have only just time to dress ; and if you are late, the Patriarch will never forgive you.'

'The what ?' asked Sir Fitzroy.

'Ah, I forgot,' laughed Geoffrey, 'that you did not know that the Patriarch is our term of endearment for our dear old father, Sir Villiers. I need hardly tell you that it was Mollie who first of all gave him the

name, which has stuck to him ever since. He is prouder of it than of anything else in the world, simply because Mollie gave it to him.'

So saying, Geoffrey led Sir Fitzroy up a polished oak staircase, the walls hung with old family pictures, into a charming bedroom looking out over the garden far away to the purple hills. It was eminently comfortable, and Sir Fitzroy whistled softly to himself as he dressed, feeling well satisfied with his surroundings.

'If the daughters are as pretty as the house is comfortable, I shall have no reason to complain of my quarters,' he murmured.

Eight was just striking as Sir Fitzroy left his room. He had come by so many twists and turns, that, his bump of locality not being well developed, he did not know how to proceed to the oak-room, where

Geoffrey had told him he would find everyone assembled.

‘What a fool I was,’ he grumbled, ‘not to ask Geoff to come for me! What on earth!’ — as his foot hit sharply against something, which on nearer inspection proved to be a footstool; then away went his feet, and not being used to oak floors, he almost subsided into a sitting posture.

He recovered his footing and his dignity with difficulty, and inwardly swearing, proceeded on his voyage of discovery.

‘I shall be late for dinner!’ he grumbled; ‘and all because this wretched house has as many turns and twists as there are cells in a bee-hive. The Maze at Hampton Court would be easy to find one’s way out of compared to this.’

Just then he saw a door a little way

down an oak passage, into which his erring footsteps had led him.

‘That must be it,’ he exclaimed, with renewed confidence.

He walked on boldly, pulling down his shirt sleeves, and arranging the flower in his coat, and rejoicing that at last his worries were over. A few quick steps brought him to the door—the haven, he believed, ‘where he would be.’ A few seconds more, his tiresome journey would be a thing of the past; only a thickness of wood divided him from dinner and Paradise.

Even as he thought, his fingers touched the handle of the door, turned it quickly without noise. He advanced some paces into the room, and saw—Heavens! what was he to do?—instead of the smiling faces of Sir Villiers and his guests, and of Geoffrey, he beheld a room one blaze of light; round it ran a panelling of oak

beautifully carved, the walls covered with satin, the panels alternating with family pictures ; from the ceiling hung a chandelier of steel, with many wax candles ; flowers were in all directions, and chairs and sofas of all kinds were scattered about. A carved oak secretaire, with book-shelves well filled, went one side of the room ; in the deep window stood a dressing-table, covered with brushes and bottles with silver tops, and an old silver looking-glass in the centre.

In front of the glass stood the most lovely girl Sir Fitzroy had ever seen ; with one hand she was holding her wealth of red-brown hair, while she brushed out its rippling waves with the other. Her stays and petticoat were all she had on, and below the petticoat a lovely foot and leg, cased in white silk stockings and shoes, were to be distinctly seen.

Sir Fitzroy gazed spell-bound ; the beauty of the girl he had so unluckily intruded upon fairly bewildered him : he forgot where he was and what he was doing. Just then some slight noise attracted the lady's attention ; she turned round to find a stranger looking at her.

‘ Good gracious ! What shall I do ? ’ she exclaimed ; and snatching up a shawl which lay near, she opened a door and fled into the next room.

‘ Here's a pretty business ! ’ murmured poor Sir Fitzroy. ‘ I've lost my character for ever. I wonder where I have wandered to, and which of the “ Enchanted Princesses ” that was. How lovely she is ! One of the guests, I suppose. It's uncommonly awkward for me. I shall lose my character for good, besides offending the lady mortally, past all redemption. Was ever a fellow in such a scrape ? and

all because of Geoff, and not learning my way to that confounded oak drawing-room.'

Much ruffled in temper, and feeling extremely injured, Sir Fitzroy again proceeded on his search. He opened another door. This time it was the right one; and in a few minutes he was the centre of a group, all anxious to make him feel at home among them all. Dinner was announced. Still the fair heroine of his adventures had not appeared. Who could she be, and where could she be?

A few minutes after Sir Fitzroy had at last landed himself in the drawing-room, Geoffrey came whistling down the passage, knocked, and was admitted to Mollie's room. He found her just putting the last touches to her toilette. She dismissed her maid, and turned to Geoffrey with a face in which blushes, confusion, and an intense

desire to laugh all struggled for the mastery.

‘Well, madam, and what have you been up to,’ asked Geoffrey, as he kissed Mollie, ‘that your cheeks hang out such signals of distress?’

‘Oh, Geoff!’ responded poor Mollie, nearly crying, ‘the most dreadful thing has happened!’

‘Something always does go wrong with you when I am away,’ answered Geoffrey philosophically. ‘It is nothing more than I expected. There never was anyone who wanted looking after so much as you do. Whatever other talents you lack, you have an unmistakable one for getting into mischief. What has happened this time? Have you choked Laddie by too many bones, or broken Goldielock’s knees, or smashed my dog-cart, or what? Speak, or I shall be tempted to believe that, as Shake-

speare says, "My misfortunes have not come singly, but in battalions," upon me. Speak, or for ever after hold your tongue.' And Geoffrey put on such an absurd air, that, in spite of all her troubles, poor Mollie could not help laughing.

'This has happened,' she returned. 'It has at least the merit of being original; it has never happened before, and I hope it never will again. I sincerely trust that it will be "acted for this night only." I was standing in my stays and petticoat, brushing my hair, when some noise made me turn round, and there in the doorway stood a man looking at me. Oh, Geoff! it was *awful*. I don't know who he was; but I feel so ashamed, I could never look him in the face again. I think he must have been one of the valets who had lost his way. I do hope he will not wait at dinner this evening, for I feel as if I should

disappear under the dinner-table with shame.'

Geoffrey was indulging in a war-dance of delight round the room, laughing heartily and exclaiming :

'Capital ! Capital ! It is the best thing I ever heard. He, of all persons, for it to happen to ! Catch me, Mollie !—catch me, Mollie !' he broke off. ' I feel as if I should die of laughing. It is the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of.' And Geoffrey burst out laughing again, and laughed until a fit of convulsions seemed the only road out of his difficulties.

Mollie stood by with an injured expression. She had expected sympathy ; she got screams of laughter. Verily a stone, when she had asked for, and thought she was sure of, bread. Alas for the vanity of dependence upon any human being or thing ! The only thing human beings ever seem

able to do, to succeed in, is to fail you most surely when you have the most right to their constancy in your utmost hour of need.

‘Well,’ at last said Mollie, ‘I think you might feel for me in such a dreadful adventure. I don’t think my cheeks will ever be cool again.’

‘Oh, oh!’ laughed Geoffrey. ‘It is the richest thing I ever heard of.’ At last, seeing that Mollie seemed on the point of crying, he stopped, took her face between his hands, and gave her a soft kiss, wiping the troubled eyes that the tears were so very near to. ‘Never mind, little Mollie,’ he whispered; ‘don’t worry. No doubt it was some stupid valet. But don’t think about it any more. Come along to dinner, and let us drive away all unpleasant thoughts, at any rate for the present.’

So, arm-in-arm, they departed, Geoffrey

still chuckling to himself as they went. Just as they came to the oak stairs, the drawing-room door opened, and the house party appeared on their way to dinner.

‘Late, Mollie,’ said Sir Villiers as he passed her. ‘You will be like the three little kittens ; you will have “no pie.”’

A loving glance at her father was all Mollie’s answer.

At that moment Sir Fitzroy looked up. He was passing with René on his arm, and this is the picture he saw : a girl standing a few steps above him, gowned in soft white, pearls in her ears, round her white throat, and on her fair round arms ; red-brown hair, deep, truthful eyes, one little foot peeping from the folds of her dress, soft lace covering her bosom ; among the folds of the lace one trail of passion flowers ; a silver lamp, which she held in her hand, shed a dim light over the radiance of her beauty.

‘Oh, Geoff!’ gasped Mollie; ‘there is the valet with René. What does it all mean?’ and she half turned as if to fly, and a most becoming blush spread over her face as she spoke.

‘Stop!’ said Geoffrey, laying a detaining hand on her arm. ‘Don’t be a goose! The *valet* is—well, he is—— Allow me, my dear,’ he broke off suddenly, ‘to present to you my friend and brother officer, Sir Fitzroy L’Estrange. My sister, Miss Mollie Adair, Sir Fitzroy L’Estrange, *alias* the *valet*,’ this from Geoffrey in a convenient aside.

Tableau! But it was no use doing heroics; it was best to accept the situation, awkward as it was; so Mollie came forward with outstretched hand and a glad smile of welcome upon her face.

‘And the face is as fair to look upon,’

thought Sir Fitzroy, 'as the voice is sweet to listen to.'

Sir Fitzroy looked as if he could not gaze enough at Mollie.

At dinner he found her placed on his left side. For some time he left her in peace, which Mollie inwardly thanked him for, as she had by no means recovered from her adventure; and to find the hero of it sitting next to her at dinner was, to say the least of it, embarrassing. But, with rare tact, Sir Fitzroy left her alone until she had regained her composure.

After a time, Mollie stole a glance at him. Certainly the valet was very good-looking; Geoffrey had been right in that. Moreover, he looked pleasant and kind.

He was tall and very slight, with eyes and hair as black as a raven's wing. Mouth and chin were beautiful, shaded by a black moustache, which did not, however,

hide the perfect shape of the mouth ; and there was a look of power about him altogether that gave a sense of protection to the women he elected to honour with his notice.

He was a captain in the Grenadiers, not well off, and much spoilt by fine ladies, whose pet and slave he was. All the same, everyone called Fitzroy L'Estrange a good fellow, particularly men ; and if men call another by that title, it proves there is something to like in them—they have so much more chance and opportunity of judging a man's true character than women have, that a man's opinion of a man is the one to be taken. Only to each other do men ever take the mask off ; to women, where there is always something to be gained by a little humbug, they invariably practise a little deceit.

‘ Miss Adair,’ said Sir Fitzroy, ‘ I hope

you will forgive me for my unlucky blunder this evening. It was entirely Geoffrey's fault, not showing me the way downstairs. I hope you believe this, and will accept my most sincere apologies.'

'I am not Miss Adair,' said Mollie, letting her eyes rest for a brief moment on Sir Fitzroy's face. 'I am only Mollie.'

'And a very charming Mollie, too,' Sir Fitzroy felt tempted to say; but, somehow, he felt as if the speeches he was in the habit of using to London ladies would be out of place with Mollie, so he refrained, and kept his pretty speeches to himself.

'Well, then, Miss Mollie,' resumed Sir Fitzroy, 'will you forgive me?'

'Yes,' whispered Mollie; and a little hand for a moment was placed confidently in his.

'Now that is all settled,' said Sir

Fitzroy. 'I am so glad,' he continued ;
'we shall get on capitally.'

The dinner passed very pleasantly. Bright faces, cheery laughter, and good cheer, made everyone feel amiable.

Vivienne was in fits of laughter at Mollie's expense, as Geoffrey, under a strict promise of secrecy, had related to her Mollie's first acquaintance with Sir Fitzroy.

When the ladies left the room, Vivienne came up to Mollie, and patting her gently on the face with her fan, whispered :

'You and the valet seemed to fraternise capitally.'

'How did you know, Vivienne?' gasped Mollie in answer, looking round fearfully, in case anyone should hear. 'Oh, that wicked Geoff!' she exclaimed ; 'he told you. I will punish him for that.'

'Quite unnecessary, my dear,' coolly re-

plied the provoking Geoffrey. 'Besides, you would not know how to set to work; it would be a Herculean task, quite beyond your small powers; that you ought to know by experience.'

'My poor back ought to be three times as broad to bear the weight your iniquities have cast upon it.'

'Oh, Mollie, Mollie!' he exclaimed; 'when will you learn wisdom?'

'Speech is silver, but silence is gold,' retorted Mollie; 'that is a thing you will never learn, Geoff. All the same, I can't be angry with you, and you know that, and take a mean advantage of my amiable weakness.'

And Mollie rubbed her soft cheek lovingly against Geoffrey's hand, which held her own.

'I told Fitzroy what you took him for,' continued incorrigible Geoffrey.

‘You did not!’ exclaimed Mollie. ‘How dare you?’

‘Fact, upon my honour as a gentleman and an officer,’ Geoffrey said; ‘and I can assure you he looks upon it quite in the light of a compliment.’

‘It’s no use talking to you!’ at last sighs poor Mollie, fairly out of patience. ‘Perhaps Vivienne can reduce you to order again.’

‘I shall not take the trouble,’ says Vivienne, moving away as she speaks.

‘Do stay and talk to me, Vivienne,’ pleads Geoffrey; ‘I haven’t seen you for ages. I really will be good; I have made a clean breast of all my peccadilloes. Won’t you give me absolution?’

And he looks so handsome and winning, that Vivienne cannot resist; so she returns to her seat, on the arm of which Geoffrey perches, quite happy and content as long

as he may listen to the voice he loves so well, even when it is rebuking him.

‘Never mind, Geoff,’ says Sir Fitzroy; ‘let this evening be the beginning of friendship between us, Miss Mollie, will you?’

‘Yes,’ says Mollie.

So the evening ends; but never does Sir Fitzroy, in the years to come, ever forget his first, unorthodox, strange meeting with sweet Mollie Adair.



CHAPTER V.

THE LOVERS' WALK.

'Look, look ! the summer rises in her cheeks ;
A blush as hot as June comes flooding o'er
Her too pale proudness.'

PROCTER.

THE acquaintance between Mollie and Sir Fitzroy, so queerly begun, like other strange proceedings, after the first hitch, went on its way rejoicing. Months of ordinary companionship would not, in the ordinary course of events, have put them on the pleasant, happy terms they enjoyed now.

After their first meeting, shyness between them was no longer possible ; there-

fore they fell naturally into all the pleasures of a country life, such as Earlstoun afforded them. And what other life can ever make people acquainted like that of an English country house ?

There was no one to interfere with Mollie ; her father trusted in her, in which he was quite right, and Geoffrey and Vivienne were devoted to her.

As for René and Sir Talbot, Margot and Hugh Lindesay, Lettice and Bruce Aylmer, they were inseparable. Sir Villiers had given his consent to their engagements ; and in the intervals allowed by boating, picnics, walks, drives, etc., there was a perpetual talk of weddings, a constant arrival of presents, and a general atmosphere of marrying and giving in marriage, coupled with violent discussions on the relative merits of 'satin' against 'stamped velvet,' of 'point de gaze' in opposition to 'point

de Venise,' that left the combatants exhausted, but not convinced (for they were all as obstinate as 'Balaam's ass') on the field of battle.

August was waning to its close, dying gradually but surely; soon the birth of September would be celebrated all over the earth. The days were almost too warm; all those at Earlston used to be so overcome by the heat that, until the evening, they were rarely fit for much, except to sit, almost buried in the deep sweet grass, by the side of the trout stream which ran through the park—where we first made acquaintance with Mollie—almost soothed to sleep by the hum of the brown bees, like flying lumps of brown velvet, the song of the birds, and the murmur of the water as it glided along over the stones, here and there making a little bubble round some stone larger than the rest, and sometimes

ruffled by a hungry fish jumping half out of the water to snap at a tempting fly.

One afternoon, about two months after their first meeting, Mollie and Sir Fitzroy have somehow managed to lose their companions, and to find themselves in the 'Lovers' Walk' alone, by the bank of Mollie's pet stream. The banks were one jewel-case of bright blue forget-me-nots, wild geraniums, purple fox-gloves, delicate anemones, like stars, thyme, and graceful, luxuriant, emerald-green fern, which further inland stood over a man's head on horse-back, and formed a safe shelter for the red-deer and other deer, of which there were great numbers.

'It is a delightful nook, isn't it, Miss Mollie?' said Sir Fitzroy.

'Yes,' replied Mollie, who was buried in a bed of fragrant thyme, which scented the air with its balmy breath.

‘It is a spot to dream away one’s life in—where everyone ought to be happy,’ continued Sir Fitzroy musingly.

‘I have spent some of the happiest days of my life here,’ replied Mollie, ‘both in my childhood and since. I love the sound of the water, with its

“Men may come, and men may go,
But I go on for ever.”

To me there is a sort of intoxication in the sound: it is like some subtle influence which steals over me, and fascinates me, and keeps me prisoner by its murmur in spite of myself. Geoff and I used at this time of year always to come here at sunrise. We used to get into a small boat—moored in that very diminutive boat-house you see just at the bend to the right—and then row down to the waterfall, about half a mile farther on. We used to wash our faces in the clear sparkling water, generally both lean-

ing over the same side of the boat at the same moment. Why we were not both drowned has always been a mystery to me ; but Geoff can swim beautifully—his Eton days taught him that, if nothing else—so he assured me that if we did upset, at the most I should only get a ducking, which would give me an appetite for breakfast.'

'A nice couple you and Geoff must have been,' laughed Sir Fitzroy ; 'incorrigible pickles, I should say.'

'And you would say right for once in your life,' retorted Mollie ; 'I was a mischievous elf, a fact I have never regretted. I had an old nurse who lectured me whenever she got a chance, as she was very fond of inflicting me with her dismay at my shortcomings. Our old nurse's name was Deborah Markham ; or Deb, as Geoff called her. She was a picture of a nurse in her print dress, snowy - white handkerchief

pinned across her bosom, clean apron, and high white muslin cap, with a broad black ribbon round it. She well deserved her name—which is Hebrew, and means “bee”—for she was only to be equalled in industry by that little insect. She allowed no drones in her hive—she was housekeeper also—but kept her maids well employed. She had a copy of Watts’s hymn of the “Little Busy Bee,” illuminated by me, in a style peculiar to myself, and with a variety of colouring that would have put a rainbow to shame, and caused it to hide its diminished head for ever. I was about six at the time I executed this work of art—so called by a polite fiction—and Deb had it framed and glazed, and hung up close to her own particular arm-chair, in her special corner in the nursery, to be the terror and reproach of all idle nursery maids.’

‘Poor Deb!’ ejaculated Sir Fitzroy, in a

voice of the deepest pity, 'she has my entire sympathy! You must have led her an awful life, and helped by Geoff—I tremble to think of her sufferings;' and Sir Fitzroy shuddered as he spoke.

'She had worse than that to endure,' coolly replied Mollie, cracking a 'caramel' between her strong white teeth as she spoke.

'What else did she endure?' inquired Sir Fitzroy. 'Give me a "caramel," please, Miss Mollie.'

'Not good for you,' responded provoking Mollie; 'besides, there are only just enough for one person—I couldn't share them with you.'

'I wish you would share,' began Sir Fitzroy, raising himself on his elbow, and twisting himself into an eminently break-neck position, the better to enjoy the sight of the perfect profile calmly exposed to view a few yards beyond him.

‘Don’t tell your wishes, for mercy’s sake,’ interrupted Mollie, her face getting pink all over, from her forehead to the tip of her small ear. ‘Don’t you know that if you wish a thing, and tell another person what it is, it does away with the efficacy of your wish, and it is never realized?’

‘But I want to tell you my wish,’ persisted Sir Fitzroy; ‘it is quite a different one from anyone’s else—you have never heard anything like it before, and I hope never will again.’

‘How do you know what wishes have been confided to my well-known powers of sympathy?’ retorts Mollie. ‘You are the most confident person I ever knew; such vanity deserves reproof.’

‘But you will listen?’ begins Sir Fitzroy.

‘No, I won’t,’ says Mollie; ‘you’re reckon-

ing without your host ; that's all about it. I will give you some more of my early experiences ; they are food for babes, such as you are. Now, not a word,' says Mollie, as Sir Fitzroy begins undauntedly with an 'I say, Miss Mollie——'—'silence is your part. Where was I ? The thread of my unparalleled eloquence is lost. Oh, I know, the Glory Hole !'

'The what ?' asks Sir Fitzroy, knowing enough of Mollie by this time to be aware that, as Shakespeare says, 'What I will I will, and there's an end,' describes her exactly, and that for the present she has elected not to listen to him.

'I will explain what the Glory Hole means, most potent sir,' replied Mollie ; 'listen while I unfold a tale. In our nursery there was a small cupboard, in which Deb used to keep cold plum-pudding,

jam, honey, etc. ; Geoff and I christened this abode of good things "the Glory Hole," and frequent were the raids we made on it when we thought she was safe out of the way. But one day she caught us—I in the very act of devouring the last bit of plum-pudding, and Geoff carefully finishing a pot of strawberry-jam. We were well punished, however, by being then and there sent to bed, which cured us of our propensities for the contents of "the Glory Hole."

'And serve you right, too !' laughed Sir Fitzroy. 'Oh, Miss Mollie ! Miss Mollie ! what a torment you are !'

'Isn't it lucky I have not got a twin sister ?' innocently asks Mollie, lifting up a pair of questioning eyes to meet Sir Fitzroy's gaze fixed on her.

'Lucky indeed !' replies Sir Fitzroy ; 'what ever should I do with a second

specimen as wilful as you are ? There is no catching you.'

'No, I am not to be entrapped ; I shall not play fly to your spider,' responds Mollie, springing up lightly.

Her hair is full of bits of thyme and grass ; an inquisitive bee has alighted in his wanderings on the sleeve of her dress, and is slowly proceeding on his way, having come to the conclusion that her sweet lips, after all, are not for him to touch. Her eyes are bright with fun ; her mouth is quivering with laughter ; altogether, she is enough to tempt any man.

So thinks Sir Fitzroy, as he hastily gets up, and comes towards her with outstretched hand.

'Mollie, you little witch !' he begins, 'you are enough to——'

But before his sentence is finished, Mollie has flown past him, and is running

down the path at the top of her speed, with a scared look on her face. Heedless Mollie forgets that paths, in common with other things in this life, have a provoking way of having turns, and of altogether objecting to a straight line (that line we all find it so difficult to keep—ah me! it is so easy to go crooked!); and this particular path is in no way different from other specimens of the kind, except in the fact that it possesses twice as many twists and turns as six ordinary well-conducted paths. Mollie is bound to come to grief; it is only a question of time. She still continues flying along; her feet hardly seem to touch the ground. Sir Fitzroy flies after her, bent upon catching her if possible; but the pace is getting too good for him. Not so for Mollie; she was almost invincible running, and like a modern Atalanta, she was speeding away from a suitor, although she did not know it as yet.

But to all things there is an end, and after steering safely past four most unexpected turns, Mollie rushes right into something 'fair, fat, and forty,' which promptly collapses into a breathless, horrified, gasping heap of warm humanity. Mollie goes down headlong; she and Mother Earth embrace, and become intimately acquainted then and there. Her hat has disappeared, her dress is torn, her face is buried in a heap of fresh-mown grass; by a special interposition of Providence, her garments are discreet, and do not go over her head, but a pair of boots and neat stockings, with a liberal display of leg, are aloft in the air, for the admiration of all beholders.

'Heavens! what a vision!' exclaims Geoffrey, at this moment appearing, and forthwith going into fits of laughter at the sight of Mollie's legs flourishing in mid-air, her face having entirely disappeared; she is

making vain efforts to extricate herself. Then his gaze falls upon the fat heap, out of which the 'breath of life' seems nearly extinguished.

'Geoff, you horrid boy!' comes in muffled but appealing tones from Mollie, 'do help me.'

Geoffrey, as well as he can for laughing, goes to Mollie, and reverses her, so that once more her feet take their proper position upon her 'native heath.'

'Oh,' sighs Mollie, 'that horrid Sir Fitzroy! I will pay him out! My mouth is full of leaves and grass, and I believe I have swallowed a spider, and ants are stinging me all over! Oh, that horrid man!'

'Blows the wind in that quarter?' murmurs Geoffrey. 'I am beginning to comprehend. Ye gods! That sweet youth is up to mischief, and has frightened his prey.'

What has Fitzroy been up to?' he inquires.

'Shan't tell you,' replies Mollie. 'I never want to see him again.'

'You two seemed destined to have odd encounters,' serenely observes Geoffrey; but meanwhile he continues, 'Poor Miss Lamb is nearly killed; no wonder, having Mollie flying at you just when you have had a heavy luncheon. The consequences may be fatal, in which case Fitzroy will be hung, and you also. You will present a sweet appearance, hanging side by side; it is evident you are to go through life and death together.'

By this time Geoffrey, with Mollie's aid, has put Miss Lamb on her legs again, and between thumping her on the back and patting her gently, she is gradually recovering her breath and her lost dignity.

‘I beg your pardon, dear,’ says Mollie;
‘I am so sorry.’

Just then Sir Fitzroy appears, and Geoffrey gives him a graphic account of all that has happened, and he goes into peals of laughter, which somehow restores Mollie’s good temper, though she tries hard to look cross. So, breathless and limp from the fray, they return to the house.



CHAPTER VI.

SO NEAR, AND YET SO FAR.

‘The hand which strikes the chord of love,
And so striking, nevermore shall pall.’

ESSEX STUART.

WHAT had caused fearless Mollie to run away from Sir Fitzroy, and thereby to come to such signal grief? Her motive must have been a strong one; and yet it was simple enough. Mollie had never been in love, but now she did not know what had happened to her. Surely no summer had ever been like this one; the birds sang more blithely, the flowers smelt sweeter, the park was more lovely. What had caused this sudden change?

Vivienne, who had been an interested observer of all that was going on, came to a rapid conclusion that Fitzroy liked Mollie, and that, as yet unknown to herself, Mollie cared for him. She also saw that, after Mollie's rash self-betraying flight, unless something were done, a few judicious words spoken, for lack of them Mollie in her shyness might throw away for ever the love that was hers. So Vivienne made herself as pleasant as she could to Sir Fitzroy, encouraged him to be with her, and to talk to her, so that Geoffrey's rage was becoming absurd, and even long-suffering Norman was beginning to think that matters were getting serious, going a little too far even for his placid equanimity. Mollie also began to entertain doubts as to Vivienne's designs upon Sir Fitzroy, and to take a dislike to Vivienne that was first cousin to actual hatred.

The Patriarch, dear man ! saw nothing. He never did ! If troubles came to him, he tried his best to get out of them ; failing that, he bore them resignedly. He did all things but meet troubles half-way.

‘ Time enough,’ said Sir Villiers, ‘ when Providence sends them to us, and we have no alternative but to accept them ; until that time arrives, I would rather think of something else.’ And so he invariably did.

The six lovers were occupied with their own concerns. Sir Fitzroy seemed quite to have transferred his allegiance since Mollie’s flight from him. He was with Vivienne always. At last Geoffrey thought matters had come to a crisis, so he determined to speak to Vivienne.

‘ May I request the honour of a few minutes’ private conversation with you, Vivienne ?’ said Geoffrey, one morning at breakfast, the beginning of September.

‘Can I spare him any, Sir Fitzroy?’ asked Vivienne, with an air of simplicity. ‘Let me see. At twelve we are going to walk to Primrose Farm; at one we lunch; at two you are going to punt me down the stream to the Lovers’ Walk; from two to four, we shall sit there and read Swinburne. I can’t be interrupted while I read Swinburne; can I, Sir Fitzroy? At five I am to go to tea with you at the Home Farm, to see the pigs; at six we are going to sing together “Sweethearts;” at seven I am going to repose; at seven-thirty I shall be dressing. No, Geoff; I am afraid I have not even the tenth part of a second, and I am afraid all the remainder of Sir Fitzroy’s visit it will be the same thing, as our tastes are alike, our hearts beat in sympathy, and Sir Fitzroy is educating my tastes in poetry, especially with Swinburne. He says my powers have been neglected; but he thinks,

with all the care he can give me—and he is such a dear, kind fellow, he has no thought for anyone here except me—that I shall make the most promising pupil he has ever had. I did not think,’ she resumed with an arch look, in an audible aside to Geoffrey, ‘that at my age—I am twenty-one, you know—I should inspire “*une grande passion* ;” but really, that poor Fitzroy!’ and she shrugged her shoulders in the prettiest, most pitying manner. ‘He will tell me he loves me next,’ she continued. ‘What am I to do then? Men are so very imprudent, so exacting. I suppose Norman would have to call him out, and shoot him, unless, dear Geoff, you would do it, to save Norman the trouble. You are so good-natured, I am sure you would do this for us, wouldn’t you?—though I do hope, I really do, that Sir Fitzroy will remember that I am a married woman!’

‘You are an abominable flirt, that’s what you are!’ growled Geoffrey, losing all patience. ‘If I were Norman, I would punish you as you deserve.’

‘I am thankful to say that you do not stand in that proud position,’ responds Vivienne provokingly. ‘You are a regular “dog in the manger.”’ And with this parting shot Vivienne gets up, makes Geoffrey an elaborate courtesy, and, accompanied by Sir Fitzroy, vanishes from the room.

Geoffrey looks as black as thunder; Norman’s eyes twinkle. From a look his wife gave him as she passed, he is beginning to understand. Bystanders generally do see most of the game, and he is wise enough in his generation to trust his wife. The Patriarch sees nothing; the lovers have no eyes or ears except for themselves; Mollie looks wretched.

‘Come along, old darling,’ says Geoffrey, going up to her ; ‘let’s have a quiet time together. Hang the others ! Don’t let us give them even a passing thought.’

And drawing Mollie’s hand under his own, Geoffrey proceeds down the oak passage of sainted memory, and passes with Mollie to the park side of the house, and so on to the lake, where Geoffrey unmoors the boat, helps Mollie in, and the boat floats lazily down the water.

Meanwhile, what has happened to Sir Fitzroy and Vivienne ?

No sooner did they find themselves out of hearing, than they both burst into shouts of laughter. Vivienne laughed until the tears rolled down her cheeks.

‘Oh !’ she gasped ; ‘if looks would kill, where would you and I be now ? Preparing for a decent burial, I think. Geoffrey’s face, as he tried to awe me, was the richest

thing I have ever seen ; even Norman was beginning to get alarmed, until I gave him a look as I left the room. My character is gone completely, and all because of you, Sir Fitzroy. What reward do you propose making me ?

‘ A perpetual *carte blanche* to my house after I am married,’ responded Sir Fitzroy, ‘ and my present most grateful thanks for your unbounded kindness and pluck. You really are a trump,’ he continued admiringly, ‘ and Norman is a very lucky fellow.’

‘ *Merci, mon ami !*’ said Vivienne. ‘ It only wanted this last exquisite speech to fill my cup of happiness full to overflowing. The joy of being positively appreciated by Sir Fitzroy L’Estrange, Bart. ! Shall I ever survive the honour ?’

‘ You are too bad, Mrs. Standish,’ said Sir Fitzroy, looking quite shy.

‘ Seriously,’ resumed Vivienne. ‘ How

much longer are we to play at "cross questions and crooked answers?" I think we have kept the farce up long enough; I must try something fresh. I long for "fields and pastures new." I won't tell Geoff; and I think you had better try your fate with Mollie—everything in this house seems set to "marriage bells." I am quite ready to say "Bless you, my children."'

'And I am quite ready to be blessed,' replies Sir Fitzroy; 'the sooner the better, say I.'

And so it comes to pass that, about four the same afternoon, Geoffrey—who is taking a constitutional round the lake, in a very cross frame of mind—suddenly comes face to face with Vivienne, who is sitting in the boat pretending to fish and digest Swinburne in the intervals of having her line baited by a small but dirty child, strongly reminding one of the immortal 'little vulgar boy.'

Vivienne looks up with her sweetest expression as the sound of a footstep falls on her ear. She seems as if she had not seen him, though she had been stealthily watching him for the last ten minutes, and was quite prepared to jump out of the boat, and, by a masterly detour, turn his steps towards herself should he show any signs of a contrary intention.

‘Dear me, Geoff, is that you?’ said Vivienne; ‘who would have thought of seeing your highness here?’

‘Where is Sir Fitzroy?’ asked Geoffrey.

‘Vanished into thin air,’ responded Vivienne; ‘but don’t let’s talk of him. I want to talk to you about something very urgent and important.’

Vivienne is in one of her soft moods. How charming she can be when such is the case! So she lays her soft hand upon Geoffrey’s arm, and bids him come and sit

in the boat beside her, while she discourses with him quietly.

Geoffrey does as he is bid, nothing loth. He experiences a feeling of delight as her fingers clasp his coat-sleeves, and so is ready for another lesson of 'Fool's Paradise.' How tender, how hopeless is his love for Vivienne, never really shown to, though assuredly guessed by her! What true woman can ever fail to know when a man cares for her? If there is an obstacle in the way—such as there was between Geoffrey and Vivienne—then, if she is worth anything, she helps the man to keep his secret from being spoken in words; but no human power can prevent her realizing, acknowledging to herself, and being glad in the certain knowledge of such perfect constant love which asks nothing, and only desires to be spent in the service of her he loves.

Some such feelings passed through their minds as they sat in the boat. No sound audible but the soft kiss of the blue waters against the brown earth of the banks, or the flapping of wings caused by the occasional flight of two stately swans, or the joyous song of a bird as it returned thanks to God for its life and being. Overhead white fleecy clouds were chasing each other in swift pursuit, brightened here and there by glimpses of azure sky, with silver edgings where the darkness was deepest.

‘Geoff,’ said Vivienne, after a few moments’ silence, occupied by their own thoughts, ‘so near, and yet so far,’ and by an interested study of the beauties of nature’s panorama, an ever-increasing one, replenished constantly by the rich store from her portfolio, ‘what do you think Sir Fitzroy has remained here so long for?’

‘Hang Sir Fitzroy!’ is Geoffrey’s unparliamentary language.

‘Hush!’ responds Vivienne. ‘Oh, you shocking boy! you must be relegated to your nurse and tutor to be tardily cured of such dreadful speeches; evidently the extra twopence has never been paid for your education!’

‘I don’t want any tutor but you!’ responds Geoffrey, somehow possessing himself of one of Vivienne’s hands, invitingly near him.

‘Paws off, Pompey!’ says Vivienne, obliged to be horrified at such proceedings; ‘do not poach upon your neighbour’s preserves—respect Naboth’s vineyard or farmyard; there is only one old, but early, bird in it—myself.’

‘Don’t punish me, then,’ responds Geoffrey; ‘if you do I shall be—I really shall be—think of it well, under all its

aspects, and duly announce your decision—I really shall be under the painful necessity of kissing you, Vivienne, so consider the penalty.'

'You are wandering away from the subject!' retorts Vivienne; 'always a sign of weakness—in point of fact, a tacit acknowledgment that you are worsted—that you really have nothing further to say; but I have somewhat to say,' she resumes, 'and I intend that you shall listen to it!'

'Ready, most potent queen!' responds Geoffrey, flinging himself down in the boat by Vivienne, and pillowing his head on his arms in lazy but perfect enjoyment. 'Begin: one, two, three, and——'

'What should you say to Sir Fitzroy as a brother-in-law?' asks Vivienne.

'A what?' shouts Geoffrey, raising himself upon his elbow, with an expression upon his handsome face as if he had grave doubts

as to his cousin's sanity—already in the distance he saw visions of Dr. Radcliffe and Colney Hatch. ‘A what?’ he repeated.

‘A b-r-o-t-h-e-r - i - n - l - a - w!’ spelt Vivienne, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. ‘I have said it, and I have spelt it; and for a consideration I will even write it down. Do you think that you will understand it then, dear? I am afraid, I really am, that after these three ways are exhausted, there is no method in the British language by which I can make you understand the fact, melancholy and startling as you appear to find it, that Sir Fitzroy L’Estrange wants to marry Mollie, if Mollie will graciously consent to marry him. I pity the poor man,’ she continued, ‘if Mollie is half as dense as you are.’

‘Oh!’ answered Geoffrey, ‘what a blind bat I have been, not to have seen this.’

‘No more eyes than an owl in an ivy

bush,' coolly responds Vivienne, determined not to spare him. 'However, eyes,' she continued, 'or no eyes, such is the case; and Mollie must be captured, and made to give Sir Fitzroy a fair hearing if she doesn't want to marry him—he can console himself by flirting with me.'

'Better not!' growls Geoffrey.

'Really, Geoff, your manners are only to be equalled by a bear that has had no food for a week; you are savage to the last degree. Why shouldn't I flirt with Sir Fitzroy if I like? My old man doesn't mind, as I must have some one to amuse me.'

'Your old man is absurd,' answers Geoffrey; 'he would give you anything you crave, no matter what, if he could only get it for you. Perhaps you would like the moon, to see if it is made of green cheese?' sarcastically observed Geoffrey.

‘Certainly,’ replied Vivienne; ‘I will ask Norman about it as soon as I return home. It is quite an idea on your part, worthy of remembrance; indeed, I shall say, like Captain Cuttle, “when found, make a note of.”’

And so saying, Vivienne pulled a tiny pocket-book out of her pocket, and proceeded to write eagerly.

‘Don’t be too ridiculous,’ laughed Geoffrey.

‘Then listen to me,’ retorted Vivienne. ‘Sir Fitzroy L’Estrange wants to marry Mollie; will you help him to do so, if possible?’

‘Yes,’ responds Geoffrey; ‘for he is a rare good fellow, though very poor, and if Mollie likes him, all will be well.’

‘Small doubt upon that score,’ says Vivienne; ‘only I want you to help Sir Fitzroy to catch Mollie alone, will you?’

‘Yes! yes! yes!’ replies Geoffrey.
‘Now, as my reward, will you let me kiss you, Vivienne dear? just once!’ he pleads wistfully.

‘How many times more am I to refuse you? You really have a most remarkable memory—remarkable for its power of entirely forgetting all it ought to remember,’ answers Vivienne.

And before Geoffrey can prevent her, she jumps lightly out of the boat, and lands on *terra firma* once more. He speeds after her, and the end of it is that they run a race, arriving breathless at the house, Vivienne exhausted, but triumphant, having beaten Geoffrey by three yards. She proceeds to find Sir Fitzroy, and tell him of her success, and then she runs upstairs to her room for a chat with her husband and child, which she never misses, before dinner.



CHAPTER VII.

THE FATE OF A 'DISH OF BACON.'

'Alas ! misfortunes travel in a train,
And oft in life form one perpetual chain.'

YOUNG.

THE next morning dawned fair and lovely. Punctually at ten o'clock everyone was assembled in the dining-room, as hungry as they could well be after a refreshing night's sleep, and the keen appetite for the good dishes of this world that youth and good constitutions had given them. Punctuality was one of the 'Patriarch's' virtues; never late a moment himself, he could not tolerate such a want of method and order in other people, least of all in his own family;

therefore he expected to see all in his house at his hospitable board at the hours he had fixed for wishing for their presence. Everyone delighted in acceding to his wishes ; he was so dear and kind to them all, that it was a genuine pleasure to them to do anything they could to please him.

As a rule, breakfast in a country house is at best but a dull and depressing performance. People have not yet warmed to their day's work ; they are oppressed by a recollection of the money they lost the previous evening, when that provoking partner of theirs, who has an idea that he can play whist, never held a trump, and revoked—in short, committed every iniquity calculated to make you lose your temper ; or by a memory of all the foolish after-dinner speeches, born of mine host's 'dry Monopole,' which you drank as if it had been water, and a sentimental tenderness for the

fair face so close to yours in the summer moonlight as you uttered fond nothings, offsprings of the time and scene, to your companion.

Supposing she remembered them also, and since the previous evening looked upon you as her special property, awful visions of an irate father and indignant mother rise before your despairing eyes, and you register a mental vow never again to trespass in this fashion, or again to commit such insane follies: daylight and moonlight are two such very different things.

At breakfast, then, even the one person who the night before appeared all that was most charming and desirable in your eyes, seen by the morning light, seems—well, she really does seem rather ugly; certainly she has a faint touch of ruby red at the point of her aristocratic nose. How very deceiving moonlight is! Last night you could have

taken a cheerful bet that pink and white of the tenderest hues blended together and struggled for the mastery on the soft velvet of her pearl-like skin, and certainly her nose was of the most delicate white imaginable, while this morning 'bloom of Ninon' and 'blanc de perle' must have been responsible for the fairness of her charms! What a revelation in every sense of the word! what an awakening! And, there is not the shadow of a doubt about it, decidedly her conversation is undoubtedly dull, hopelessly idiotic (most likely she finds yours the same, though this in your overweening vanity you fail to perceive); why, she has not two ideas in her empty head, and even if she possessed these unheard-of luxuries, she is incapable of stringing them together, and so sustaining anything like a connected conversation. And yet last night you could have de-

clared that her conversation was a happy combination of the wit of Sydney Smith, the humour of Artemus Ward, and the tenderness and love of Byron !

Therefore a word of warning. Always choose your companion for life by the uncompromising light of a full summer sun (and mind she is sitting with her face to the window, so that not a charm or a fault of her face can escape your eagle eye) ; then you will see what is nature, what not, in the composition of her face. Never trust to delicious, lovely, deceiving moonlight. No ! without doubt, if you and your neighbour at breakfast get on well, and are positively on speaking terms at this delectable meal, it is a proof, sure and certain, that there is between you two a bond of deeper liking and sympathy, a something more than 'meets the eye,' that the rest of the company are strangers to.

At Earlston, certainly everything was done that was possible to make everybody sociable and comfortable. Quantities of small round tables were arranged about the room ; each table held two people only ; a complete set of old Dresden china for two was on each table, with Queen Anne teapot, sugar-basins, and cream-jugs, and silver bowls of late roses and mignonette shed a delicious perfume over all. The lovers occupied three of the tables, and they did not seem bored by any means ; they were all right. Vivienne and Geoffrey were quarrelling with one another in the window ; Sir Villiers and Miss Lamb were discussing the *Morning Post* and their letters at a table by the fireplace ; Colonel Treherne and Doris seemed to find life endurable by the shelter of a large screen ; Mignonne was tormenting her father on the farther side of the room ; ‘ Laddie ’ was

roaming about between the guests, getting a kind pat from one, a plate of bones from another; Sir Fitzroy was seated in solitary blessedness at the best table of all, one placed in the deep window in the centre of the room, the soft light was coming through the painted glass with which the top part was filled, the lower part was set open to catch the fragrant breeze, the pretty deer were in groups on the green plain, the glorious old trees made a background of ever-varying beauty as the light and shade fell upon their wealth of foliage, and on the richness of their tints, of red, and crimson, green, yellow, and brown. Everyone was accounted for except Mollie.

'I am not going to waste my energies again in finding that incorrigible young person Mollie,' said Geoffrey at last, when breakfast was half over and still no Mollie

had deigned to grace the fair scene with her still fairer presence.

‘Let me go and look for her,’ said Sir Fitzroy, getting up hastily, and all but upsetting the table in his eagerness.

‘Quite useless, my dear fellow,’ responded Geoffrey philosophically; ‘eat your breakfast in peace. Here comes the truant,’ he continued, as just then the door opened, and a loving pair of arms were put round his neck, and his sister’s soft kiss was laid upon his cheek.

‘Good-morning, my darling,’ said Geoffrey; ‘let’s look at you. Why are you so late for the morning meal? You are a hopeless Mollie!’

‘Am I not?’ she answered, with a loving look at Geoffrey.

‘Well, I forgive the lateness of your appearance, in consideration of the blooming looks you have brought with you to

grace the feast. Do go and eat, Mollie,' he continued.

'Where?' replied Mollie; 'every table is full. Let me have your place, Geoffrey; you must have eaten enough by now. There will be a visible increase in your goodly proportions if you continue at this alarming rate, and a fortune to your long-suffering tailor in letting out all your garments.'

'Not so, fair lady,' coolly replied Geoffrey; 'I shall not give up my place to anyone,' pinching his sister's ear as he spoke until she begged for mercy. 'I am obliged to look after Vivienne and see that she does not eat more than a whole partridge, a dish of ham and eggs, a loaf of bread, a pot of jam, an entire teapot of the strongest tea, varied by gallons of milk and cream, and several pounds of sugar. Otherwise we shall have a case of "spon-

taneous combustion." This has been her morning *menu*—fact, I assure you,' he gravely continued. 'How she contrives to hide so much so early in the day is a mystery to me. She must feel "real crowded." Let me recommend you, Vivienne, to take a walk round the room, like the children at a school-feast, and see if by exercise and shaking yourself vigorously you can eat any more; otherwise I shall positively be anxious about you, literally doubtful if you will survive until lunch. I forgot,' he went on musingly, 'at 11.30 I arrive with a decanter of port and a banquet of sandwiches!'

'A libel, the whole of it!' answered Vivienne, as well as she could for laughing. 'All this does not feed Mollie,' she continued.

'Miss Mollie,' Sir Fitzroy interposed,

'won't you come and sit at my table?
Please do.'

And he looked at Mollie with imploring eyes.

Seeing there was no help for it, with a murmured 'You have done this on purpose' to Vivienne as she passed, Mollie crossed the room to where Sir Fitzroy stood waiting for her to relieve his solitude.

'What will you have, Miss Mollie?' asked Sir Fitzroy, when Mollie's tea had been provided with cream, and sugared to her liking.

'Some bacon, please,' replied Mollie, who, for some reason best known to herself, seemed overwhelmed with shyness at finding herself sitting opposite to Sir Fitzroy, away from all the others. They were almost as much alone as if they were breakfasting together on their honeymoon,

and something about it all appeared to make Mollie nervous and uncomfortable.

“Coming events cast their shadows before,”’ whispered Geoffrey to Vivienne, seeing Mollie’s evident confusion.

‘Bacon is the only thing that has become beautifully less at this sumptuous board,’ said Sir Fitzroy. ‘From information I have received, I have every reason to believe that nothing less than a whole pig has already been consumed here by these cormorants. The price of bacon has already gone up; soon pigs will be a relic of the past—we shall only have the recollection of juicy porkers to console us.’

‘I must and will have bacon,’ responded obstinate Mollie. ‘Pig, or nothing!’

‘So you shall, my dear,’ said Sir Villiers.

He got up and rang the bell.

Drinkwater, the misnamed butler—for

he held an honest opinion, that time and the temperance movement were alike powerless to shake, that water was good for outward application only, and that only in judicious quantities and at stated times, as he held that 'tubs were nasty cold things'—appeared in answer to the summons.

'Send Granite up with some hot bacon at once, for Miss Mollie, please,' said Sir Villiers.

'Very well, sir,' promptly responded Drinkwater.

While waiting for the appearance of the succulent and much-desired pig, an almost unbroken silence prevailed. Everyone seemed occupied with their individual thoughts.

'Dear me!' said Sir Villiers, reading a bit out loud from the *Morning Post*, and so breaking the silence. 'What a Govern-

ment this is ! Never was there anything like their performances—absolutely devoid of the first principles of common-sense !’ And Sir Villiers began an anxious search for his spectacles, which he mislaid, on an average, forty-nine times a day, and always found in the one place he never looked for them in, namely, his waistcoat-pocket.

After due search, in all likely and unlikely places, they were once more unearthed by patient Miss Lamb, part of whose duties it always was to retrieve them.

‘Dear me !’ observed Geoffrey from his table, at the same time that his father spoke. He was industriously perusing the *Standard*, glancing at Vivienne the whole time over the top of the paper as he did so. ‘Gladstone again at his tricks ! Oh, what a Government ! It is perfectly awful ! What a collection of geese !’

‘By that wise speech,’ responded

Vivienne, 'you have delivered a soul from purgatory.'

'What do you mean?' asked Geoffrey.

'Simply what I say,' calmly replied Vivienne. 'Does not your Highness know that when two people say the same thing at the same time, they have delivered a soul from purgatory? At least, so say the wise people, and who am I that I should doubt them?'

'Never heard it before,' said imperturbable Geoffrey. 'I believe you invented it this moment. Anyhow, I am very glad if I have for once in my life been useful.'

'You may well say for once,' retorted Vivienne.

'*Merci, madam!*' replied Geoffrey, with a mocking bow and his most winning air. 'It is a great deal at last to have extorted a civil word from your Majesty.'

'Make the most of it, I advise you to,'

answered Vivienne; 'for it is "first and last."'

At that moment the door at the end of the room opened, and Granite appeared, bearing aloft a steaming dish of hot bacon. The smell alone made one hungry; what would the taste be? Verily, food for 'the gods.'

Between the door and the room the large screen stood; close to it, Colonel Treherne and Doris were sitting. All the floors at Earlston were of polished oak, like ice, so hard and shiny was it. Granite came along nothing daunted; oak floors were nothing to him; he trod them every day of his life at Earlston, and had done so for many years, as he had been at Earlston a long time. But on this particular morning there was decidedly something wrong, something not quite as it should be. Either his feet and the oak were tired of the con-

stant companionship in which they found themselves, or else that proverbial 'straight line' was more than usually difficult to find and walk in; certain it is that with a gasp of dismay, a smothered scream of horror from all present, Granite's muscular supporters, with feet that would have made the despair and sure death of any inquiring well-educated beetle out for a harmless walk, slipped and gave way under him, and he promptly described a spread-eagle upon the oak floor, his feet flourishing in the air, his scarlet silk legs resounding with an astonishing rap on the ground, and the dish of bacon going flop in Doris's lap, and from thence sliding many feet ahead on to the carpet.

Up jumped everybody, choking with laughter; among them they restored the fallen hero to his proper position in life once more, and, crestfallen and dismayed,

he obeyed Sir Villiers' order to fetch some 'more bacon.'

All dulness and shyness had vanished by now. How could anyone, by any means, keep grave in the face of such an event ?

They were all laughing and talking over poor Granite's misfortunes, when he re-appeared, hot and breathless, with a second edition of pig.

'I am so hungry!' murmured Mollie to Sir Fitzroy, who looked at her with eyes of keen sympathy for the delay in her breakfast.

'Here it comes,' he responded.

And here it certainly did come. But not yet, oh Mollie ! will your longing lips touch it, for at the same time and the same spot as before, Granite again slips up, and once more lands the unlucky pig where it should not be, namely, the floor.

'Ye gods !' murmurs Geoffrey, executing a war-dance of delight, and choking completely in vain efforts to preserve his gravity. 'What is the matter with Granite ?'

The latter has picked himself up, and stands ruefully looking at the dish, and rubbing his fingers, well covered with bacon fat, all over his powdered head.

'Could you make it convenient to do that again ?' sternly inquires Sir Villiers of the crestfallen Granite, who stands stupidly gazing at him in an absent manner.

At this Granite turns and flees, pursued by shouts of laughter from everyone.

'Too bad !' says Sir Villiers. 'Never saw such extraordinary conduct !'

'Granite has evidently been anticipating his dinner at this early hour,' says Geoffrey, 'by an intimate acquaintance with your strong ale.'

‘Do you really think so?’ says Sir Villiers.

‘I never think; I am sure,’ replies Geoffrey.

Once more the door opens; once more Granite enters; and then it becomes evident that the bacon will never reach its destination safely, for Granite sways and lurches in an ominous fashion.

‘Could you make it convenient to do that again?’ murmurs incorrigible Geoffrey; and, as the words leave his lips, they bring their own disastrous answer, by landing, for the third and last time, the bacon again on the oak floor.

‘Go away, sir, this moment!’ thunders Sir Villiers; ‘and don’t let me see you again until I send for you.’ And in a very bad temper Sir Villiers departs to his own den and rings for Drinkwater, to confer with him as to the best course to

pursue with regard to Granite's unusual enormities.

The cause of them is unluckily plain enough, and to see the giant's (for he is a very big broad man) vain efforts after the sobriety he has so effectually lost is comical in the extreme.

'They say the third time pays for all,' laughs Mollie, while the tears run down her cheeks; and, in common with everyone else, she laughs until she is quite exhausted.

It certainly has in this instance, for old Granite looked, with his hair twisted at the top of his head, like a cockatoo.

'Well,' replied Geoffrey, 'if only authors could run through three editions, and be out of print, as swiftly and completely as that poor bacon has disappeared, there would be more money made in the literary world.'

Mollie is obliged to eat what she can get after this little episode. Indeed, she is too hungry, and too tired from laughing, to object to anything Sir Fitzroy may offer her.

‘Will you come and take a walk to the hop gardens by the Tower Lodge, after lunch?’ asks Sir Fitzroy; ‘say about four.’

‘If Geoff and Vivienne will,’ answers Mollie.

‘All right,’ responds Geoffrey. ‘We will meet at the hall-door at four.’

Thereupon they all disperse, still laughing, until luncheon-time.



CHAPTER VIII.

THE ROMANCE OF A KENTISH HOP-GARDEN.

‘Creeping and curling, and twisting and twirling,
Still working on till it reaches the top ;
Never despairing, and finally bearing,
A lesson of life may be learn’d from the hop.’
E. L. BLANCHARD.

FOUR o’clock is striking as Sir Fitzroy appears at the hall-door. Needless to say, Mollie is not there : perhaps she holds the principle that what you have, you do not value, and therefore thinks that a little waiting will prove beneficial to Sir Fitzroy, and cool his impatience a little. Certainly Sir Fitzroy is a specimen of an English

gentleman that any girl might be proud of for a lover.

As he stands on the steps, leaning against the old oak door, with its quaint knocker, studded all over as it is by large steel nails, with his hat off, and his dark eyes eagerly watching for Mollie—the woman he loves best on earth—he looks every whit the handsome, gallant man he is. He is fit to win any girl's love—how much more, then, Mollie's, whose fresh, untried heart has responded to his ever since their hands met for the first time the evening of his memorable arrival at Earlston. Mollie is half won already, although she does not know it, nor does he.

Very fair is the scene spread out before him : the deer, cows, and sheep, which dot the plain in all directions, lend it life ; the rocks overhead are trooping home to their
ers ; and there is a deep-blue sky, an

ever-varying changing light and shade, which renders the landscape inexpressibly beautiful.

It is a real St. Martin's summer, to me the most perfect time almost of the whole year, though all seasons have a separate and distinct beauty of their own. Winter is lovely. How beautiful the world is when one wakes up and finds that Jack Frost has been abroad while we have been sleeping, and from out of his wonderful work-basket has woven creation into marvellous shapes. Every stick or twig, every leaf and branch, each road, and hedge, and ditch, the scarlet hips and haws, the ruined sheds, the grand old castles, the picturesque cottages, alike are clothed by his wonderful judgment in gowns and mantles of glimmering, shining, diamond icicles, which later on in the day are turned into parures of rubies, and sapphire, and emeralds, as the sun rises and

sets, and floods the earth with a wave of shifting colour—of red, and blue, then merging into soft pale green, and dying in a crimson colour, which turns the icicles into coloured jewels.

What is more lovely than early spring ? The first pure snowdrop that raises its innocent head from its bed of velvet moss, the herald of hope and joy, the resurrection of all that is lovely, and to be desired—the first note of the cuckoo, as it robs its neighbour's nest—the first nest one finds with its tiny occupants, soft balls of down—the first downy-yellow ducklings, and pert chickens, as they scamper round the cackling important mother-hen—the first leaf of magnolia and syringa—the first turquoise or pearl butterfly, for they are like precious stones in their beauty—the first tiny white lamb. What can speak of our eternal resurrection more clearly than all these do ?

or tell us more plainly that as these re-appear year by year, so shall we, in the resurrection, see those once again whom we have loved and lost? What should we do without the promise of spring?

Then, again, summer, with its jewel-case of floral treasures for our acceptance; its millions of roses, and all other flowers; the joyous songs of many birds; all around us the hum of happy insect life; far and wide the fields of waving golden corn, interspersed with poppies and cornflowers, field daisies, and tall green grass, where many a tiny fieldmouse finds a home, and many a ladybird gems the stems and bells of the golden barley with its brilliant little red and black body—like a smart lady in a curious velvet jacket brocaded in black; then masses of tender green fern, with soft-eyed deer peeping through the wooded glades, who scamper away in a fright as some sound

startles their timid companions ; its days of sunny delights in the soft-scented sweet air—then, I say, summer is lovely always.

And last, but by no means least, there is Autumn. How grand it is to watch the gradual death of Nature. How calmly and grandly Autumn dies—how, without a murmur, she yields to the inevitable, and graciously and serenely lays down her crown and sceptre, and resigns in favour of her sister Winter. What a lesson she is to us struggling, fighting, wearying mortals ! How she tells us by her teaching, if we would but learn it and accept the lesson, that ‘time is long and eternity is lasting ;’ and that as she sinks into an honoured grave, so can we also, if we will but give ourselves up to God. How fair is the autumn then ! The hedges are splendid—they are one magnificent mass of colour ; no two leaves alike—red and brown, grey and

yellow, green and crimson, all jostle each other, while grey lichen, red-brown moss, and silvery grass, are mixed up with its beautiful profusion. Blackberries, with tempting luscious blue-black fruit, are in every direction ; mushrooms, in their pretty dresses of white satin, lined with delicate pink velvet, are all over the fields ; hops twine their lovely, graceful forms round the poles from which they will soon be taken ; partridges and pheasants form the sport of many an enthusiastic sportsman ; and the soft haze, like a violet tulle veil, hangs in the early morning and evening over all this fair world of ours.

Undeniably, at all seasons of the year, our world is a beautiful one ; the only things, alas ! that deform it are the sins, and follies, and wickedness of those who are made in God's own image. Alas that it should be so !

The minutes were speeding away quickly, and Sir Fitzroy was waxing impatient, when, happily for the safe preservation of his temper, Mollie appeared—lovely enough to make any man desire her for his wife.

Her soft clinging dress of Indian muslin, simply trimmed with lace, showed each line and curve of her supple perfect figure to perfection. In one hand she held her sailor's hat, likewise of muslin, with a trail of red poppies wound round it ; in the other she held a black-satin parasol. No ornaments had she, save a ring of rubies and diamonds that had been her mother's. Her small head was thrown back ; her foot planted lightly but firmly on the ground as she walked quickly across the hall to where Sir Fitzroy was standing.

‘ At last, Miss Mollie,’ he said, smiling as he spoke.

‘Where are Geoff and Vivienne?’ was Mollie’s irrelevant answer.

‘I don’t know,’ said Sir Fitzroy; ‘and,’ aside, ‘what is more, I don’t care.’

‘We can’t go without them,’ said Mollie decidedly. And she proceeded to ring the bell, and sent various people in search of the missing couple; but all to no avail, they were invisible.

Mollie looked undecided and much provoked.

‘Let us walk down to the hop-garden,’ at last said Sir Fitzroy. ‘Won’t you, Miss Mollie?’ he continued.

Something in his tones made Mollie raise her vexed eyes to his; and something she saw there made her blush rosy red, and at the same time caused her to answer that she would go.

She did not like to appear too eager to avoid Sir Fitzroy’s company; besides,

secretly, she was glad to have a quiet walk and chat, alone with him.

So they left the house, and went quietly past the stables to the Tower Lodge. For some time they pursued their way in complete silence. At last Mollie broke the silence by saying :

‘I have got thorns in my brain to-day.’

‘What ?’ answered Sir Fitzroy, looking somewhat startled, as well he might.

‘Thorns in my brain,’ repeated Mollie, smiling. ‘Don’t you know what that is ?’

‘No,’ replied Sir Fitzroy ; ‘but I am anxious for information.’

‘It means that I have a bad headache,’ demurely says Mollie.

‘That is a thing I have never had in my life,’ replies Sir Fitzroy ; ‘and, judging from your expression, I think it must be a very unpleasant sensation.’

‘Horrid !’ responds Mollie briefly.

‘I am experiencing a very painful feeling just now also,’ says Sir Fitzroy.

‘What is that?’ asks rash Mollie.

‘Heart-ache,’ answers Sir Fitzroy, with a queer little look in his mischievous eyes.

‘Have you ever suffered from it?’ he continues, with a sly glance at his blushing companion.

‘Never!’ indignantly replies our Mollie, irate that he should dare to ask such a question with reference to her; ‘and if I had I should not tell you. And what is more,’ she continues, ‘I hope I never shall; I can do without such nonsense perfectly.’

‘It is not nonsense,’ says Sir Fitzroy.

‘Oh, yes, it is,’ answers Mollie; ‘it is simply the greatest nonsense that ever was invented.’

‘Oh, Miss Mollie, Miss Mollie! how can you?’ says Sir Fitzroy. ‘Two minutes ago you said you did not know what a

heart-ache meant ; and now you say that the tender passion is absurd. So to argue means an intimate knowledge of your subject, which I thought you said you did not covet, and had never possessed.'

Such a reply was unanswerable. Mollie stood convicted. Here was a contradiction of terms.

'You are very tiresome, Sir Fitzroy,' is Mollie's reply after a few moments of awkward silence ; 'you confuse me so with your questions that I don't know what I say or mean !'

Oh, Mollie, what a confession of weakness !

'I did not mean to tease you, I am sure,' replies Sir Fitzroy. 'I am very unfortunate,' he continues. 'I never can please you, and I always seem to say the wrong thing. What shall I do ?'

He looks so sincerely penitent that

Mollie relents. Laughter takes the place that tears had almost taken for their own, and smiles flit across her April face ; and Sir Fitzroy feels that his shortcomings are forgiven once more.

By this time they have passed through the Tower Lodge on to the dusty high road.

It is a curious sight to watch the farm-waggon laden with hop-pickers. In some places the picking is not yet in full swing, and the waggon that pass Mollie and Sir Fitzroy are conveying fresh hands to their destinations.

Truly they are a motley crew, gathered, as they are, some from respectable families, to whom the few weeks' holiday means rest and ease from business ; others from the haunts of St. Giles', Whitechapel, etc., not forgetting a goodly sprinkling of Irish, with their keen sense of humour, their improvi-

dent habits, their indescribable attire of rags and tatters—you cannot honour them by calling them clothes. Verily, it is a wonder that such a collection of shreds and patches should form a harmonious, certainly a picturesque, whole, and, by some wonderfully mysterious means, clothe these reckless specimens of forlorn, hungry, needy humanity.

The roads were thronged with hop-pickers, some walking, some riding donkeys, most of them perched on the tall waggons sent for them to the different stations by the farmers who employ them.

The waggons are often piled five feet above the ledge with household furniture of every description—kettles, beds, chairs, tables, mattresses, clothes, little baskets, and the invaluable and most necessary ‘camp-kettle,’ on which their dinners depend, and the eternal gridiron, on which,

over a fire of sticks, they toast succulent 'red herrings' for their evening meal.

Perched on the top of all this luggage are men, boys, women, girls, children of both sexes, forming, with the varied goods, a picturesque confusion. How they manage to sit steadily without being pitched from their exalted position into the dusty road below, and so embracing mother Earth, is a speculation and wonder to all who behold them.

At night the whole country is lit up with innumerable fires for cooking their supper; and it is a pretty sight to see the little children, the old men, and young girls, all collected round the welcome blaze, flitting about like Rembrandt shadows warmed into life as the fire darts up a tongue of flame one moment, and then almost dies away again. And soon the harvest-moon comes out, and shines in its

splendour on the embers of the fires, the remains of the feast, and on the wooden huts, covered with moss of every shade, which shelter for the night the worn-out Kentish hop-pickers.

By this time Mollie and Sir Fitzroy had arrived at the entrance of the garden, where, after paying their footing to the little children who rushed out on seeing them to brush their boots with bunches of hops, they proceeded to look for Geoff and Vivienne.

It was a splendid year in Kent, and the gardens looked quite lovely. They were a mass of green bloom, here and there relieved by a tinge of yellow; the poles bent under their heavy burdens; the bunches of hops grew as thickly as it was possible in every direction; the bine and tendrils reached on all sides, and were lovingly entwined, like lovers in a fond

embrace. Through the tender green of the leaves the sun shines brightly, showing clearly and distinctly every vein; the berries hang in grape-like clusters, twining their abundance from pole to pole. Each separate clump of plants—'hills,' as they are called in Kent—was like a small garden, so heavy were the clusters, so thick the bunches; each leaf and blossom had a beauty of its own; and far almost as the eye could see was a vista of 'hills,' almost weighed to the brown earth with their fragrant burden; row after row, like a stalwart regiment of Guardsmen, stretched in interminable vistas of beauty and wealth alike for the farmer and the hop-pickers; and for a background the dusky hills of dear old Kent, merging from softest blues and greys into deep, full yellows, purples, and crimsons, as the sun rested lovingly on their rugged sides. The fleecy blue

clouds, with silvery white, sometimes golden edges, like a lady's cloak of satin and lace, chased each other constantly and swiftly over the face of hill and dale, and lighted up as they sped along every leaf and blossom in the garden, every picturesque garment, every group, that would have made an artist's delight, of brown-faced women, sunburnt women, roughly-clothed men, and scraps of humanity in the shape of children, who were assembled in numbers inside the garden among the hops.

‘Do you know a song of Elizabeth Philps’s, with words by E. L. Blanchard, called “The Hop-pickers?”’ asks Mollie of Sir Fitzroy, as they seat themselves on a quantity of hop-poles just shorn of their glory, at a distance from the pickers, where they can see without being seen, and where the graceful tendrils make a green bower over their heads.

‘No,’ replies Sir Fitzroy, gazing, as he speaks, lovingly at Mollie, who receives his look calmly and quietly. ‘Will you sing it to me?’ he continues.

‘Yes,’ answers Mollie.

Then on the soft evening breeze come the tones of that wonderful voice ; so sweet is it, that hop-pickers and all the assembled crew listen breathlessly. Even to their untutored ears it sounds pleasant—to some it seems a foretaste of the angels’ songs in heaven ; and as they listen, many among them recall the dear old days before their own sins and follies had made them what, alas ! they now are. Tears steal down weather-beaten, sad, lost faces ; eyes smart with the hot tears that pour from their aching lids ; hearts that have been hardened for many a year take fresh courage again ; new resolves spring up, and, thank God ! bear good fruit, in men and women

given over for many a day to the evil that has perhaps been the only thing in life that they could depend upon and call their own ; and voices that have hitherto uttered little but drunken speeches and terrible oaths break into soft words of affection and sympathy, and many an unkind speech asks for pardon and receives it. This is Mollie's song :

‘Voices are merry, as swiftly the berry
Flies from the poles, brought in dozens along,
Light is the labour, when talk to a neighbour
Cheerily blends with the hum of a song.
Bright skies above us—around, those who love us,
Weaving a garland as gaily we sing ;
Off comes a cluster of hops, with a lustre
Shaming the gold it will afterwards bring.
Creeping and curling, and twisting and twirling,
Still working on till it reaches the top ;
Never despairing, and finally bearing,
A lesson of life may be learn'd from the hop.
Glimpses of scenery caught through the green'ry,
Such as no art ever form'd for us yet ;
Soft winds caressing, with health as their blessing,
Peers could not purchase what freely we get.
Brim the bread-basket ; if any should ask it,
Where lies the secret the berry imparts ?
No answer fitter than “Work is the bitter,
Keeping all holidays fresh in our hearts.”’

Sympathetic words, gloriously sung. Mollie pauses, somewhat out of breath with the exertion of her song.

‘My belief,’ she begins, ‘is that Geoff and Vivienne have gone off on some wild-goose chase of their own, and have quite forgotten that they promised to meet us here.’

‘Nothing more likely,’ responds Sir Fitzroy. ‘From my knowledge of their character and liking for each other’s society, I should say that they have consigned us to oblivion from the moment they made that rash promise.’

‘I shall be very cross with Geoff when I see him,’ replies Mollie.

‘Why?’ asks Sir Fitzroy.

‘Because he has promised and has not fulfilled. We ought to go, ought we not?’ she continues.

‘Not for a moment,’ pleads Sir Fitzroy.

‘I never see you alone for five minutes, and if I do, you are never easy until you have invented some excuse for running away from me, or some one has come in and interrupted our *tête-à-tête*. I want so much to speak to you, Miss Mollie. May I do so?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ answers Mollie, looking much flurried. ‘Perhaps some other time. Do you know what time it is? It is positively half-past seven. Oh, dear! we shall never be ready for dinner, and father will be cross.’

‘It is always some other time,’ answers Sir Fitzroy, almost crossly. ‘Let dinner go for once. You do not want any, nor do I. They can’t scold us if we are not there to be scolded. Let us stay and watch the hop-pickers until they stop work, which they will do at ten; then we will go home, tell Geoff to make love to Deb, and get us

some supper, and then give them leave to scold us like the naughty children we are, to their hearts' content. We are close to Primrose Farm ; Mrs. Acres will give us some milk and bread-and-butter or a draught of " golden ale ;" and see, Miss Mollie,' he continued, drawing a tempting box of ' caramels ' from his pocket, ' I will return good for evil, and give you as many of these as you like, although you would not share yours with me the other day. No, Miss Mollie ; here you are, and here you must stay until we have had our talk. I flatter myself you will find it a pleasant one. Look,' he continued, pointing to the lovely scene before them, ' surely you don't want to leave that. Grant me once the pleasure I ask ; you won't repent it.'

There was something in Sir Fitzroy's face that sent the colour to Mollie's tell-tale cheeks, but which also touched a chord hidden

away somewhere in the depths of her heart, and gave a new charm to her expression.

‘I will stay,’ she replied, raising her soft eyes to his.

‘That is right,’ responded Sir Fitzroy. ‘Now let me make you quite comfortable. “Nothing venture, nothing have,” you know. We may as well be scolded “for a sheep as for a lamb.”’

So saying, Sir Fitzroy departed, leaving Mollie standing by a stile which divided the hop-garden from a field, generally studded with mushrooms, which might be had in quantities for the trouble of gathering them. Between the hop-garden and the farm, after you had crossed the mushroom field, ran a brook of clear, bubbling, running water, rich in crisp, tempting watercresses.

Sir Fitzroy was not long in returning; a few minutes, and back he came over the

short grass, with a swift buoyant step and his hands quite full; one held a jug of golden ale, the other a jug of thick rich cream, and behind him, panting with the unusual exertion, toiled fat, buxom Mrs. Acres, whose cheeks were as red and shining as one of the apples for which the orchard at Primrose Farm was justly famed. Country fare, early hours, and plenty of fresh air, had brought about the state of health that she rejoiced in.

‘Here I am,’ shouted Sir Fitzroy; his ringing voice sounded clear in the evening air. ‘You look like Marian in the “Moated Grange,” Miss Mollie,’ he laughed, ‘so dreary and forlorn is your expression.’

“‘I’m a-weary, I’m a-weary, would that I were dead!’”’ laughingly retorted Mollie. ‘What ages you have been!’

‘Very glad you missed me so much,’

responds Sir Fitzroy, who by this time had arrived at the stile, where Mollie was still standing.

‘Nothing of the kind!’ retorts Mollie. ‘I didn’t miss you; I missed my good dinner, which you have deprived me of. What have you brought me? Nothing that will reconcile me to such a loss as that, I am very sure.’

‘We shall see,’ answers Sir Fitzroy; ‘but you know that Shakespeare says, “Time shall unfold what plaited Cunning hides.” I am Cunning, and the time has arrived; behold!’

And with a flourish of the jug above his head, which threatens incontinently to send its contents flying, Sir Fitzroy deposits his treasures safely on the ledge of the stile. By this time Mrs. Acres has panted to the scene of action, triumphantly laden with a loaf of sweet home-made bread, a roll of

yellow butter, a pot of golden honey, and some new-laid hard-boiled eggs. These she hands to Sir Fitzroy.

‘Can’t get over the stile, sir!’ she pants.

‘Never mind, Mrs. Acres,’ laughs Mollie; ‘stiles are horrid inventions. Thank you so much for all you have brought me.’

‘The lad shall come with a chair and a shawl for you,’ answers the good dame, much gratified by Mollie’s pleasant manner; and as she afterwards declares to her good man, in the sanctity of their chamber, ‘Miss Mollie, she do have a way with her; she speaks that soft she would wheedle any-one into doing what she wanted. It be a rare pleasure to do things for her; she’s got a bonnie winsome face.’

‘You be wonderful partial to our Miss Mollie,’ answers her good man, ‘and so be I, for the matter o’ that. She comes of a good stock, bless her pretty face!’

And having delivered these words of wisdom to his admiring wife, Farmer Acres settles himself to sleep with a satisfied air, and is soon snoring loud enough to wake the dead.

A small and extraordinarily dirty boy now graces the scene with his presence, bearing in his black hands the chair, etc., for Mollie. Sir Fitzroy dismisses him with a shilling and his blessing ; once more he and Mollie are alone.

By this time the moon has come out in all its splendour, and the fair scene which they had looked upon a short time ago by the light of the sun is now flooded in every direction with a wave of silver moonlight. Beautiful in the extreme, like a globe of silver, the moon shines high in the firmament ; stars gleam in all directions like so many large and very brilliant diamonds, veiled by clouds of grey and deep blue

tulle. Every leaf, every twig, every bunch of hops, shows clear and distinct; the tendrils look like silver cords, the leaves shine like jewels, the blossoms seem as if they had been washed in a bath of silver; the paths between the poles look like so many broad silver ribbons; and over all is the glow at one end of the field of the fires which have been lit by those who have done their day's work, and are preparing the supper for the others when they stop picking.

A hop-garden looks at its best by moonlight. Mollie is seated in state in her bower of hops, secure from all observation; she and Sir Fitzroy have soon finished their supper. He comes over to where Mollie is sitting, clothed in a flood of moon rays. He stands with his arms folded, looking down at the sweet face half turned away from his tender gaze.

Whether Mollie looks up or not, it is certain that she feels Sir Fitzroy is looking at her. Her face gets pinker and pinker. At last she can stand it no longer, and stamping a small foot impatiently, Mollie says: 'Don't you know it is very rude to stare at a person so?'

'Perhaps,' answers Sir Fitzroy, 'if you would occasionally look at me, I might for a consideration give up the bad habit you allude to, but until you will now and then, by way of a change, direct your orbs my way, I am afraid I must continue my rudeness; for it is only by very persistent staring that I catch rarely a most fleeting glance.'

'You are absurd,' laughs Mollie.

'Would you mind looking my way just for once?' resumes Sir Fitzroy. 'Would you also mind standing up a moment?' he continues.

And Sir Fitzroy takes Mollie's hand gently in his, and helps her to rise.

Mollie would like to refuse to look at Sir Fitzroy, but she feels somehow impelled to do it.

'That is better,' says Sir Fitzroy. 'Now, Miss Mollie, I am going to ask you a question; kindly put your two hands in mine—they are quite clean; look at me straight in the eyes, answer my question without delay, and, as the photographers say, "try and look pleasant, not as if you were at the dentist's."'

Mollie laughingly obeys him; who could help it, when he is so absurd?

'Mollie,' says Sir Fitzroy, without further beating about the bush ('How nice my name sounds! He has forgotten the Miss,' thinks Mollie), 'my question is very simple: will you marry me? Think well, dear,' he resumes, 'before you answer; re-

member my life's happiness depends upon your reply.'

'Oh, Sir Fitzroy,' murmurs Mollie, 'I don't know what to say; no one ever asked me to marry them before.'

'So much the better, darling!' answers Sir Fitzroy; 'I am very glad to hear it. But that is no reason you should not marry me; will you, Mollie?'

Mollie this time lifts her big eyes to his face; and something she sees in the passionate gaze fixed upon her causes her to blush rosy red, while she answers, in a very low voice:

'Yes, Sir Fitzroy.'

'Speak a little louder, my queen,' answers Sir Fitzroy; 'I can't hear.'

'Yes,' answers Mollie, with a glad look in her lovely eyes.

'My darling—my sweetheart!' answers Sir Fitzroy, his face radiant with love and

affection, 'you shall never repent marrying me.'

And before Mollie has time to realize what is happening, without 'with your leave,' or 'by your leave,' audacious Sir Fitzroy has sealed their betrothal by a tender, loving kiss on the sweet lips, trembling as they are with the new and wonderful emotions that she does not understand; and then they sit down again.

'Isn't this better than half an hour ago, Mollie?' asks Sir Fitzroy, as his arm steals round her waist, and he draws Mollie nearer into his loving embrace.

'Yes,' answers Mollie, whose bright head has already found a resting-place on Sir Fitzroy's broad shoulder, and seems as if that was its proper place.

And so for a little time they remain, enjoying that loving foolish talk which is the paradise of lovers, and in many cases,

alas ! all that many know of happiness this side of eternity. What a glorious insanity it is while it lasts ! How indescribably bitter it is when nothing of it is left but the terrible recollection of what was !

Finally Sir Fitzroy and Mollie wend their way back to the house. They return through the garden, and are in hopes that the others will have elected to remain indoors this evening, which only shows how lost they are to all except what concerns themselves, for who in their senses, and in this fair country, would stay in the house with this glorious evening to tempt them out ?

Just as Sir Fitzroy and Mollie think they will get in unobserved, a dark form appears coming towards them, followed by a second. On nearer inspection these prove to be Geoffrey and Vivienne, who are taking an airing, and differing as usual.

‘Oh, Geoff, you wretched boy!’ begins Mollie, ‘how could you——’

‘Not join you in the hop-garden,’ finishes Geoffrey. ‘I know exactly what you wish to say, sweet sister mine; but don’t say it. If you did, you would be guilty of a base act of ingratitude, for by our judicious non-appearance you lost a brother and cousin temporarily, and found——’

‘A husband for ever, with your leave,’ finishes Sir Fitzroy. ‘Allow me, ladies and gentlemen, to present to you Miss Mollie Adair, the future Lady L’Estrange.’

‘Oh no!’ gasps Mollie, as Sir Fitzroy speaks.

‘How do you mean?’ asks Sir Fitzroy, smiling. ‘Now, Mollie, you promised to marry me; you know you did; you consented at fifteen and a half minutes past ten this evening in the hop-garden—you can’t alter that fact.’

‘ You startled her by calling her by her future name,’ interrupted Vivienne.

‘ Shall I change it to Smith ?’ whispers Sir Fitzroy to Mollie ; ‘ I will if you like.’

‘ No ; I like your own name best,’ she answers.

So all together they return to the house, and in a few minutes the Patriarch’s consent has been asked and obtained, and congratulations pour in on all sides.

At last, weary with the events of the day, Mollie says ‘ Good-night,’ and slips out of the room.

‘ Mollie !’ calls Sir Fitzroy from the foot of the oak staircase, ‘ you must say good-night to me !’

Down comes Mollie again, and, leaning over the banisters, tenders a white hand to her lover.

‘ Thank you, dear,’ he responds ; ‘ I ask

for bread, and you give me a stone. Give me a kiss, Mollie; remember, I shall have as many as I like now, to pay you out for the way you have avoided me up to now.'

'That depends,' answers Mollie. 'Tell me one thing,' she continues—'you didn't really like Vivienne?'

'Enormously,' laughs Sir Fitzroy; 'quite too awfully.'

'As you do me?' pouts Mollie.

'No, not in the least as I do you; there is only one woman in the world for me, and you, sweet Mollie, stand in that much-to-be-envied position; but I love her as my future cousin, and as the person without whose help I don't think I should ever have won my wife. I will go and kiss her, too, if you say much more,' he finishes mischievously.

'All right; you may,' says Mollie. 'Will you do so at once?'

‘Not until to-morrow,’ responds Sir Fitzroy.

‘When did you first take a fancy to me?’ asks inquisitive Mollie.

‘Ages ago,’ answers Sir Fitzroy.

‘But I want to know the exact time,’ persists Mollie. ‘Was it that day in the Lovers’ Walk, or when? Don’t keep me waiting.’

‘It was—well, it was—I really shall have to fetch my diary, I never can remember dates—well, as near as I can remember, it was the day I was going down to dinner here with René Adair on my arm, and I saw coming down the old oak stairs a sweet girlish figure—a lovely provoking face, and I said to myself, like Geraint, “Here, by God’s rood, is the one maid for me,” since when I have had but one determination—to make my Mollie love me, and be my own.’

‘Not difficult,’ says Mollie, blushing at the recollection of their first meeting; ‘and now to think I am going to marry “the valet!”’



CHAPTER IX.

FOOLS' PARADISE.

*'C'est l'amour, l'amour, l'amour,
Qui fait le monde à la ronde.'*

THE news of Mollie's engagement to Sir Fitzroy was received on all sides with pleasure. Everyone liked him : he was Geoffrey's greatest friend—if such had not been the case, the probability is that they would never have met. The only drawback—and certain it is that there will always be that tiresome for and against, which have wrecked, and will wreck for ever, so many human beings—was a decided want of £ s. d. on Sir Fitzroy's part.

It would, without doubt, be a poor match;

they were only rich in their decided love for each other. But Mollie persuaded her father to say 'yes' to her engagement ; and once permission was given, no drawing back was possible. Mollie had set her wilful mind upon marrying Sir Fitzroy, and marry him she surely would. There was nought further to be said upon that subject, and this her father knew by experience.

Mollie was constancy personified, and she had never been in love before. Once her first shyness had worn off, and the novelty of her position was some days old, then she enjoyed to the full the tenderness and devotion Sir Fitzroy seemed never tired of showing her. It was as if he could never do enough for her. Her slightest wish was gratified almost before she was conscious of it. He seemed to know by instinct all she liked and wanted.

Whatever he might be in the future, in

the present he was all that the most exacting girl could desire. He loaded her with presents of rich old lace and beautiful diamonds, that had been his mother's—he was an orphan, without a relation in the world, so that he could do exactly as he liked in every respect without consulting anyone—bouquets of lovely flowers, all her favourite books, and a thousand-and-one things that only a man who is in love with you would ever think of.

How happy they were, these two who had undertaken to journey to their life's end together. There was not a cloud on their horizon, nothing to mar their happiness except want of riches. Sir Fitzroy had his pay, and would sell out and get an appointment; so that would do perfectly. To their love-lit eyes all was joy and love and beauty. Never had Mollie had such a glorious time, and Sir Fitzroy realized that

the feeling and love he had for Mollie were very different ones from the sentiment he had honoured by that name in regard to the other ladies he had imagined himself in love with. This was the love of a man for the woman in all the world to whom he will give the sacred name of wife ; the other had been the insanity and glamour of a passion that was fatal to him in every way.

So the days passed away all too quickly. A month had already gone, and Sir Fitzroy was beginning to plead that their wedding-day might be fixed. Each day showed him more clearly the sweetness and brightness of a character like Mollie's.

The poor people and servants adored her. Mollie was full of what I call 'soft places,' such as denying herself for some poor person who could never in the smallest degree return the deed to her in kind, for example the gift of a pudding to some old dame crippled

with rheumatism and the honoured weight of many years of a lifetime of joy and sorrow nobly borne ; the present of a toy to some sick mite of a child wearing out his tiny life in pain and poverty almost before the spark was really kindled, much less in a full flame of dignity and importance ; the holiday she paid for, in the country, for the wearied sempstress, who hated the sewing-machine, which she did not possess, as she would poison, for its swift turns took from her aching fingers and throbbing head the pittance she so sorely needed ; the cheery word to a tired, worn, devoted nurse ; the fruit and flowers to a grateful sick person ; and, over all, the ‘charity which vaunteth not itself, and is not puffed up ; the charity which thinketh no evil.’ Such were Mollie’s ‘soft places.’ Her keen sense of enjoyment in the mere fact of existing, which (and thank God for it!)

has fallen to all our shares one time or other in our lives (though to many the word 'living' is an unknown word, which if heard would convey no meaning), enabled her to see good in everything, and to help those who needed it; and to Mollie's dying day she will never be cured of her 'soft points;' they are her character, her being, part and parcel of herself—nay, her best, her gentlest, truest self.

No wonder the people about and in Earlstown adored her.

'My lamb,' said Deb, when Mollie told her the news, 'what shall I do without you?'

'What, indeed!' answered Mollie, giving the old lady a hug as she spoke. 'You will have no one to torment you and keep you in order; no one to make raids upon the "Glory Hole." Just think of having all its treasures to yourself, Deb! Are you

not grateful to me, you bad old woman, for graciously condescending to marry Sir Fitzroy, and so relieve you of your greatest plague, namely, myself ?’

‘No, I am not grateful,’ answered Deb. ‘What ever do you want to go and marry for ? Such nonsense ! Girls never know when they are well off !’ she grumbled.

‘Well, even you will allow that I cannot have a husband unless I marry ; and somehow I think it would suit me to add a husband to my other goods,’ laughingly answers Mollie ; ‘and I don’t particularly dislike Sir Fitzroy.’

‘Mollie, you little witch !’ says Sir Fitzroy, coming softly behind her, and giving her small ear a pinch, just, as he says, to show that there is no ill-feeling ; ‘what do you mean by saying such things ? You shall rue your words ; for every word you

‘speak about me that I do not like, you shall give me two kisses.’

‘I shall do nothing of the sort,’ answers Mollie. ‘Don’t you wish you may get them?’ And before Sir Fitzroy can stop her, she is off down the passage like a hare, so swift is her progress, with Sir Fitzroy after her, his coat-tails flying behind him, like sails in the wind, in most undignified fashion.

‘Save me, Geoff!’ pants Mollie, catching sight of her brother standing in the gallery, and on she speeds.

Geoffrey does not see her; his back is turned. Just as Mollie reaches him he turns round. Bang she comes against him, sends him flying, and knocks him flat on his back. Down comes Mollie on her knees—it is a mercy they are not broken; and very nearly down comes Sir Fitzroy also; but he just manages, by catching hold of a

chair that is providentially near, to stop himself, and so avoid a sad finale to the dire catastrophe.

Choking with laughter, Sir Fitzroy helps Geoffrey up again. Very rueful and indignant Mollie looks as she sits curled up on the floor, her poor knees aching from the goodwill with which they had saluted the oak floor.

‘Nasty thing!’ says Mollie, with a disgusted air, pointing to the innocent but offending wood; ‘I had no idea it was so hard. Oh, how my knees do ache! Go away, both of you,’ she adds severely, ‘and send Deb with some “pomade divine.” I don’t think I shall ever walk again,’ she continues.

‘You had better have kissed me,’ laughs Sir Fitzroy.

‘What, shirking your legitimate amount of loving salutes?’ says Geoffrey. ‘Was

there ever such a Mollie ! Allow me, my dear,' he continues, ' to beg that the next time you refuse your future lord and master kisses, you will kindly send for Granite, have the gong rung, and announce your determination in the tones befitting an important declaration, ending, like the town-crier at Folkestone, with " God save the Queen." Then I shall know what to expect, and shall be careful to keep out of your way until you have either let Fitzroy kiss you, or cannoned against some one else. I can assure you,' he goes on gravely, ' such a violent sitting on the floor as I have just experienced is extremely injurious to my health after a heavy luncheon. Will no one help me up ?' he asks. ' I feel as if I was bruised all over. I am like the man " all tattered and torn." ' And limping dismally, Geoffrey walks a few paces down the passage, with a request to Sir Fitzroy

to feel his arms and legs, and see if they are broken.

Having ascertained that Providence has spared him so far, Geoffrey and Sir Fitzroy depart in search of Deb, as Mollie steadfastly refuses to quit her assured position on the floor for a doubtful one on her feet until she has been cured by Deb and the 'pomade divine.'

Deb arrives shortly, and once more peace is restored.

At last it is settled that Mollie and Sir Fitzroy shall be married at Earlston on the first of January. René, Margot, and Lettice will be married before them, so that Mollie can officiate as bridesmaid.

A few days after Mollie's wedding is settled, Colonel Treherne proposes to Doris, who accepts him ; and though people think Sir Villiers crazy for allowing his child-daughter to marry, the only answer they get

from him is that Doris's mother was no older than Doris when she became his wife, and that he thinks it will answer perfectly.

So the fair bevy of English maidens who surrounded Sir Fitzroy when this book began were all engaged to those who, as far as anyone could judge, would make them good and affectionate husbands, and give them happy homes when the Patriarch they all loved so well should have rejoined the wife he cared for so much.

Geoffrey also would be leaving Earlston, for his battalion was to be quartered at Aldershot, and for some time to come he would have to stick pretty constantly to his military duties.

Vivienne, Norman, and Mignonne would remain at Earlston until Mollie's wedding. Miss Lamb and Deb were in a constant fuss from morning till night about the

different trousseaux ; presents came pouring in on all sides, and hearty expressions of goodwill abounded.

The days seemed to fly, there was so much to be done and settled in them.

One soft day at the beginning of November, René, Margot, Lettice, and Doris are married at Earlston Church. Mollie makes a bewitching bridesmaid—such is Sir Fitzroy's opinion ; and he thinks smilingly of the day when, following in the steps of Lady Molyneux, Mrs. Lindesay, Mrs. Aylmer, and Mrs. Treherne, sweet Mollie Adair will come down the steps of the old church transformed into Mollie L'Estrange.



CHAPTER X.

BUCK-CATCHING.

‘Goodliest of all the forest, hart and hind.’

MILTON.

‘The hunt is up, the morn is bright and grey,
The fields are fragrant, and the woods are green.’

It wants but six weeks to Mollie’s wedding-day. Excellent reports have been received of all the married lovers; and really, though it is early days to judge, it seems as if Sir Villiers’ winning daughters had drawn prizes in that sad lottery called marriage, in which there are so many grievous blanks. And such indeed proves to be the case; and never for one moment do René and Margot,

Lettice and Doris, regret their marriages. Let us hope that Mollie will be equally fortunate. She would not marry the same day as her sisters ; she wanted to remain with her father as long as she could, for the true devotion between this father and daughter was such that nothing in this world could ever change it. Woe betide the one who was left if anything happened to the other.

‘Father,’ said Mollie one evening, ‘when do we begin buck-catching?’

‘Next week, my pet,’ said Sir Villiers.

‘I am so glad,’ answers Mollie. ‘We will have some fun then,’ she continues ; ‘Fitzroy,’ she goes on, ‘you have never seen buck-catching, have you?’

‘Never, darling,’ replies Sir Fitzroy ; ‘I am waiting for you to show me.’

‘You will be delighted,’ answers Mollie.

‘It is a pastime we are especially fond of, for very few places possess such an amusement.’

Accordingly, a few days after, Mollie is up very early, that she may get the first glimpse of the day, and judge whether it is likely to be a propitious one in which to initiate Sir Fitzroy into the mysteries of buck-catching. The morning is perfect—soft and balmy as July. Overhead the sky is brilliant blue, with a pattern like lace upon it of light fleecy-white clouds. There is just enough breeze to float them slowly along. The woods which bound the horizon of the plain are bravely attired in mantles of brightly coloured autumn leaves. Everything looks its very best.

More than usually bright does Mollie look as she takes her place to pour out coffee and tea for her father and lover on this glorious morning. The perfectly fitting

grey dress, with the simple white linen collar and cuffs, shows off her figure to the greatest advantage, and the lovely hair rivals the sun in brightness and warmth of colour. As Sir Fitzroy looks at her he acknowledges to himself that he is indeed a fortunate man to have won such a girl for his future wife.

After breakfast, arm-in-arm, he and Mollie saunter out a little way across the plain, while Sir Villiers disappears into the privacy of his sanctum to settle some business, give his final orders, and then prepare himself for the coming fray.

‘It is as perfect a day as that on which you consented to torment me for life,’ mischievously says Sir Fitzroy.

‘Yes,’ replies Mollie; and she gives a little sigh. ‘What rashness it was on my part to venture upon such a Herculean task; no doubt it will be the death of me, and in the deepest mourning for your sins and me;

you will have to inscribe over my green,
green grave :

“ Here lies a young and lovely thing,
An early victim to a wedding ring.”

Such an epitaph and tribute to my virtues,
in letters of gold, no expense spared, would,
I feel certain, draw tears from the hardest
hearts, the eyes least given to crying.
What do you think, Fitzroy ?

‘ Why, that your description of your end
is most fitting and proper, and shows you
to be a young person gifted with humble-
ness and modesty, and a pleasing and sincere
sense of your own numerous shortcomings,
which I was sadly afraid you were not en-
dowed with ; but after such a lovely
“ poem,” avault all doubt upon the sub-
ject !’

‘ You don’t deserve to marry me,’ pouts
Mollie. ‘ It seems to me that “ hops ” have a
great deal to answer for ; I learn that the

wires, or twigs, make baskets and wicker-work, the leaves furnish food for farm-stock and sheep, from the tendrils a vegetable wax is obtained, and from the juice a colouring matter; the young shoots are eaten, and taste, when boiled, like asparagus, and when bleached they can be made into strong paper and cardboard; the ashes are used by the makers of Bohemian glass; yarn and linen in Sweden are spun from the fibres; while from the flowers we have a tincture, a medicinal extract, and the bitter taste to beer and ale; and a hop pillow, if you can't rest or are in pain, is the most lovely thing in the whole world to sleep upon, and gives you heavenly dreams when you have departed into the land of "Nod." But,' serenely continues Mollie, 'I never—no, I never did know that hops and hop-gardens had anything to do with asking people to marry one; and I must say,' she

adds, still more severely, 'that I think you took a very mean advantage of me.'

'Why, Mollie,' says Sir Fitzroy, 'I did not know you were such a living epitome of the virtues and properties of hops. I should have been positively afraid to propose to such a walking edition of "Beeton's Dictionary of Universal Information." Where did you learn it all from? have you got any more of it?' and Sir Fitzroy assumes an air of grave and inquiring interest, and begins, 'The wires, or twigs, make basket or wicker-work, the——'

But Mollie can stand it no longer; she shuts his mouth with a kiss from her soft lips, and with a queer little look begs him not to catalogue the qualities of hops all over again. 'For,' as she justly observes, 'I know them already by heart.'

'Do you know anything more of that kind?' mildly inquires Sir Fitzroy, with

an ominous twinkle in his wicked eyes.

‘Why?’ innocently asks Mollie.

‘Because,’ responds Sir Fitzroy, with becoming gravity, ‘I was anxious for a little more knowledge. I am beginning to think that my education hitherto has been sadly neglected, the extra twopence never paid; but now, under your able tuition, it will doubtless improve unto a perfect end. And not only that—but, Mollie, could you do that again?’

‘Do what?’ asks Mollie.

‘Why, kiss me when I want to imbibe knowledge too fast!’

‘You bad boy!’ answers Mollie lovingly; ‘certainly not. I will keep you in a state of ignorance all your life, if that is to be the result. Come along,’ she continues; ‘it is time they were starting. Let us go

and see what has become of the others ;
father is never in time.'

To give a denial to her openly expressed opinion, at this moment Sir Villiers appeared.

' "Booted and spurred,
And eager for the fray,"'

says naughty Mollie, as she catches sight of the Patriarch. 'Don't fall off, father,' she goes on. 'What a beautiful get-up! Ladybird won't know who is riding her; she will miss me, I know.'

'You are a saucy puss,' says her father lovingly. 'Where are Geoff, and Vivienne, and Norman?'

'Norman thinks prudence is the better part of valour,' says Mollie; 'he is going to look after us, in case a ferocious buck comes our way; and as for Geoff and Vivienne, here they come.'

'Silver threads among the golden!'

resounds from the direction of the stables; and Geoffrey appears leading Prince Charlie, his especial property, and walking by the side of Vivienne, who, in a faultless hat and habit of Paget-blue, is mounted upon her pet—Black Diamond.

‘Stop!’ cries Geoffrey, as he gets near to Mollie. ‘What do I see?’ pointing with outstretched finger to Mollie’s red-brown curls.

‘What is it?’ calmly inquires Mollie.

‘Do I see “Silver threads among the golden?”’ asks Geoffrey, with a tragic air.

‘Certainly not!’ responds Mollie, with the utmost dignity. ‘Everything with you takes colour from that song—silver threads, indeed!’ indignantly. ‘I wonder what next you will accuse me of?’

‘I only asked for information, my sweet one,’ blandly replied Geoffrey, ‘which you

have graciously accorded me ; so I have one doubt less in the world now.'

By this time the whole aspect of the plain has changed. The herd of deer—numbering some eight hundred—have been driven from the top part of the park by the keepers into the broad and extensive plain, where they remain massed together in a compact body—some lying down, some fighting, others standing with heads erect in the air, and wide-open, soft, startled eyes, bearing witness to the fright and alarm they were experiencing in the new and dreadful position they found themselves in.

They were huddled together shaking with fright. The deer were kept in by a 'sewell,' which is a string with about three feathers tied together at equal distances of about eight or ten inches all along the line. Men stand by the sewells ; and if the deer leave the herd and attempt to

escape, they shake the sweat in their faces, which frightens them so much that it keeps them within bounds.

Sir Villiers, Vivienne, and Geoffrey rode slowly into the centre of the plain ; while Norman, Mollie, and Sir Fitzroy took up a position on the brow of the hill, where they could see all that was going on. With Mollie was her favourite deerhound, Sailor—a beautiful red dog, with smooth hair, enormously powerful, and as fleet as the wind.

The keepers joined Sir Villiers, and a few of the farmers who were used to buck-catching, which requires a keen eye, great quickness, and first-rate riding, as, unless a rider possesses all these, when the bucks turn and double in their fright, horses, and riders even, would be stabbed by their horns, perhaps killed, unless they turn as quickly as the buck does.

The scene was becoming very animated, and it was a pretty sight indeed. Old Hare, the head-keeper—who had been in Sir Villiers' service all his life—pointed out to Sir Villiers and the others the buck he wanted.

Quickly and unerringly the clever deer-hound, Captain, signalled him out from his companions in the herd, and in the cleverest way possible chased him out through the eight hundred, though numberless times the deer got back into the herd again, only to be ferreted out again by this clever dog. Backwards and forwards they went ; it seemed as if they would never get a start.

‘What a time they are !’ said Mollie impatiently.

Sailor was tugging at the leather strap fastened to his collar, which was so arranged that the dog could be let loose in

a moment, and kept venting his eagerness and excitement in a series of short sharp barks.

‘ There they go at last,’ said Sir Fitzroy ; and sure enough they did.

Captain had succeeded in getting the buck clear of the herd. Away they went, the gallant animal flying for his life, his beautiful eyes starting from his head, with an expression of pain, agony, and dread that was hard to see at first. When he left the herd he stopped short, with his grand head and beautiful horns held proudly in the air ; suddenly he became aware of his danger, for Sailor had crept up until he was about level with the buck, and then, with two or three short graceful bounds, which made him seem as if he was moved by a spring, he was off, to race his best for his liberty. It was a regular case of ‘ catch me if you can ;’ and this did not

seem a likely solution to the problem, for the deer was a magnificent fellow, and seemed likely to sell his liberty dearly. They had their work cut out for them. On flew the deer; after him tore dogs, and then the excited riders. Twice he tried to jump the fence which ran along to the lake, and twice the men, stationed by the sewells, turned him. Five dogs were in keen pursuit—Turk and Captain, Fly, Spring, and Nettle, were all tearing along at racing speed. It seemed as if the buck would tire out men and horses and dogs.

‘He will make for the lake!’ exclaimed Mollie, as she started off as fast as she could, dragging Sailor after her, with Sir Fitzroy and Norman following her.

And she was right. Straight at them came the gallant buck, with heaving sides and panting breath.

‘Let Sailor loose!’ shouted Sir Villiers;

‘let him go, Mollie!’ he yelled, as he came thundering by on Ladybird; after him tore Geoffrey, whose hat was gone, and by his side rode Vivienne, with a slight colour on her cheeks from the exercise.

‘Mollie, let Sailor go!’

Away went the dog. His speed was something terrific—it was like a flash of lightning; so quick did he go that the eye could hardly follow him. The poor buck still tore on, but Sailor gained on him fast. Another moment, and the buck would have cleared the six feet of rails which divided the park from the lake, when, with a last effort, Sailor reached him and caught him by the ear.

Over went the buck, over went Sailor, as he never let loose of the buck, they were tumbling about and fighting.

By this time the keepers had run up; and cautiously approaching, they seized the

buck by its four legs, called Sailor off, and threw the poor panting buck on the ground on its back, holding it safe by the legs. If a dog is properly trained, it always catches the deer by the ear, never by the throat or nose.

All the party come straggling up by degrees. The farmers and riders generally got off their horses, and stood about in groups, mopping their heated faces, and fanning themselves with their hats.

Hare then whistled for the venison-cart, which is a covered cart into which the deer are put after they are caught, and then he took out a sharp saw and sawed off the buck's horns. The four stalwart keepers took up the captured hero, and lifted him into the venison-cart, which was large enough to hold ten deer. When that number had been caught, the cart was driven to a paddock, where the deer were let out and

fattened all the winter, and finally, poor beasts ! shot in June.

When the door of the cart was opened, and the deer found themselves once more at liberty, their looks of surprise and astonishment were great.

‘ Well, Fitzroy,’ asked Mollie, ‘ what do you think of our entertainment ?’

‘ I think it like anything belonging to you and the Patriarch—charming,’ answered Sir Fitzroy gallantly.

‘ *Merci, mon ami !*’ responded Mollie with a little courtesy, and a provoking look from her sweet eyes.

‘ Come along to lunch, good folks,’ shouted Sir Villiers ; and, very hungry, they dispersed to the good fare provided for them all, and justice indeed did the farmers and keepers do to ‘ Squire’s ale.’

The rest of the herd kept in a frightened

crowd in the middle of the plain, with a few men to stand by the sewells.

Sir Fitzroy had the horns presented to him by Hare, as a remembrance of his first experience of buck-catching.

After lunch they all went out again, as long as the light lasted, and then returned to tea and a comfortable fire. The evening shadows soon enveloped the plain in a mist, out of which the figures of the deer gleamed like ghosts; and so, the herd the poorer, the paddock the richer, thus ended Sir Fitzroy's first experience of buck-catching.



CHAPTER XI.

A BUNCH OF CHRISTMAS ROSES.

'This day to man
Came pledge of perfect peace ;
This day to man came
Love and unitie ;
This day did man receive a remedie.'

1576.

A MONTH had passed since the buck-catching. It had gone into the store-room of memory, and the intervening days had been spent much as usual. It was Christmas-eve. The day before, the Molyneux, Lindesays, Aylmers, and Trehernes had assembled at Earlston, to spend Christmas with the Patriarch, and to attend Mollie's wedding on the 1st. Lovely indeed did every-

thing there look, both inside and outside the house. Outside it was all a glimmer of hoar-frost, a pure mantle of dazzling snow—trees, hedges, fields, roads, lake, and park, clothed in one vast sheet of brilliant sparkling white; every leaf, every twig, every tree and branch, standing out distinctly in the calm light of the moon. Icicles gemmed the sills of the doors and windows, and clung with fond embrace to the sides of the lofty chimneys. The barns looked as if made of diamonds set in silver, so lovely was the moonlight flooding the sparkling snow. The lake was frozen an honest six inches; the deer huddled together in groups, and came eagerly down to the house to be fed with hay and beans, until they became quite tame. Over everything and everybody, winter, in all its purity and severity, had flung its unclouded and gorgeous mantle.

It was a real English, old-fashioned winter—days whose intense cold made the warm life-blood course in the veins of the young, and warmed into something like animation and youth once more the stagnant existence of the elders. Days that made people rejoice in the mere fact of being alive, in the keen consciousness of health, strength, love, and beauty—hours that allowed no looking back, that acknowledged no possibility of defeat, that made all and sundry feel that ‘*Invicta*’ was their motto ; for how could anyone be conquered with this magnificent sense of existing, this feeling of health and power in their firm unyielding grasp ?

Something of this they all felt. Mollie realized it all to the quick. She had her hands full. Not only were there all the preparations for her wedding to be attended to, but she had all the villagers and servants

to think of and care for, this particular Christmas more than ever, now that a few short days would see her begin her new life, and take away from her, in many senses, numbers of her dear old friends.

Early and late Mollie was occupied, so that even Sir Fitzroy did not see much of her ; but he was naturally calm and philosophical—it took much to rouse him ; and he reflected most calmly that ‘ Christmas comes but once a year,’ and that soon he should be master of the situation.

The trees had been stripped to provide holly and mistletoe for the rooms. The front hall was a mass of holly and mistletoe, the oak passage a bower of it ; and as for the Cedar room, not even the architect who built it, or the gentleman who had condescended to furnish it without destroying its antiquity, would have recognised it as their separate and joint handiwork.

The whole of the grand old house was metamorphosed. The wide old fireplaces were alight with genuine 'yule logs;' the oak floors were polished until they did the work of innumerable looking-glasses, and walking became a matter of tact and difficulty. Everywhere there was a look of welcome; everybody beamed with mirth and laughter, goodwill and good temper.

The Patriarch liked keeping Christmas properly. 'None of your new-fangled notions for me,' said the dear man. 'Give me plenty of holly, a pretty maid to kiss under the mistletoe, barrels of beer, barons of beef, mountains of mince-pies, miles of plum-pudding, oceans of nut-brown ale, inexhaustible stores of mirth, fun, good-humour, and kindness, toast and ale in bed at seven o'clock on Christmas morning, baskets of Christmas presents for old and young, rich and poor, and God's charity over all.'

And well did the Patriarch carry out his programme in the minutest detail.

‘Your ideas ought to be framed and glazed, and distributed gratis to an admiring audience,’ said naughty Mollie. “‘Sir Villiers Adair’s rules and advice how to keep Christmas in a manner befitting an English gentleman of good position ; cloth bound, in one volume, price 3s. 6d.’”

‘I shall leave you out of my will,’ laughed Sir Villiers, ‘if you go on saying such things of me.’

‘I will haunt you if you do,’ retorts Mollie. ‘Unnatural parent,’ she continues, ‘how can you calmly contemplate leaving your favourite, your pet, out of your ill-gotten gains? For though I know nothing about it, I have an inward conviction that yours are ill-gotten gains. Don’t you think so, Fitzroy?’ turning to her lover as she speaks.

Sir Fitzroy, thus appealed to, answers :

‘Your father will give me a vote of thanks, the freedom of Earlstoun, and a badge and chain of office as big as the Lord Mayor’s, for ridding him of such a burden and responsibility as you are.’

‘If I am all that, I wonder you have taken such untold trouble to retain me,’ answers Mollie, nothing daunted.

‘His fate, poor creature!’ puts in Geoffrey, with an imperturbable and unnaturally grave face. ‘How I pity him!’

‘May you be forgiven for the last speech!’ piously ejaculates Mollie, turning her eyes up to the ceiling with a goody-goody expression that does her infinite credit, and produces shrieks of laughter on the part of her audience. ‘What are you laughing for?’ sweetly asks Mollie, putting on an air of extreme and profound astonishment.

‘At you, my sweet,’ responds Geoffrey.

‘If you could only see your expression! It is enough to make “a monkey bite its mamma;” it is positively delicious. Stay a moment, Mollie; let me fly for pencil and paper and immortalize you with that saintly expression.’

‘You are a real goose!’ contemptuously retorts Mollie; ‘but what can one expect? When you and Fitzroy get together, one remarkable fact becomes patent to even the most benighted comprehension: namely, the utter absence of brains in your two useless heads. When brains were served out,’ she continues grandly, ‘you two were certainly behind the door.’ And with this parting shot Mollie stalks indignantly away.

‘I think her future ladyship is a leetle the least bit ruffled in her usually angelic temper,’ quoth Geoffrey. ‘Won’t you be kept in order, Fitzroy, that’s about all!’

‘Nothing of the sort, my dear fellow,’

answers Sir Fitzroy magnificently ; ‘ I am not the sort of man to allow any woman to dictate to me.’

‘ Wait and see,’ says provoking Geoffrey ; ‘ you haven’t married my Mollie yet. No doubt you will be a veritable henpecked husband. Look what Mollie has reduced me to :

“ Once I loved a maiden fair,
But she did deceive me,”

he sang in his lovely voice. ‘ That is what Mollie has done ; she declared she never would leave me, and now I declare she is going to marry you, and leave me for ever to “ waste my sweetness upon the desert air.” It’s too bad !’ grumbled Geoffrey ; ‘ I am positively worn to a “ skelington,” as old Deb calls it, with pining in anticipation after my Mollie.’

And Geoffrey holds out a remarkably muscular, well-covered arm for the pity and

inspection of the public generally. Failing to obtain the pity, particularly from Vivienne, who pinches his arm slyly until he nearly screams, Geoffrey retires from the scene in a state of dignified huff, Vivienne consenting to go and talk over his woes over a game of billiards.

At a quarter past twelve that night, restless Mollie is still up. She is popularly supposed to be in bed, as all good folks should be (then Mollie's goodness is problematical), and cultivating beauty-sleep; but on this occasion, at any rate, she has missed it by an honest three-quarters of an hour.

At break of day, after a much-grudged necessary sleep, on Christmas morning, Mollie was up; and with ice and snow on the ground, such a process at that early hour is the reverse of pleasant or agreeable. But Mollie was not to be daunted. The

night before she had borrowed, with a great deal of coaxing (made partially easy to her by the sure and certain advent of many good things to come on the morrow), sundry good and noble 'clean linen baskets' from the presiding genius and authority in the laundry. Armed with these, Mollie defied fate and the weather.

Great was Mollie's reward, so true is it that 'Tout vient à bout à qui sait attendre.' Mollie made a triumphal pilgrimage with her baskets to every room in the house; the contents of these enchanted baskets were revealed and distributed, at least three presents to every servant at Earlston, and that meant something considerable. It was difficult to say who were most pleased, the donors who gave or the recipients who received; only one thing was certain, all were really pleased.

This over, Mollie proceeded with a beau-

tiful old Queen Anne 'loving cup,' duly prepared by Drinkwater with 'toast and ale,' to the Patriarch, and administered the contents to him, an attention which he much appreciated, receiving in return his loving blessing ; and then on to the others, and finally to Geoffrey.

'The top of the morning to you, my queen,' said that lazy warrior, who was reposing the length of his six feet comfortably among the sheets and pillows ; 'you look like a Christmas rose, my darling ;' and Geoffrey kisses his sister fondly. 'I wonder whether I can extricate a present for you from under the pillow which has been honoured by my lovely locks resting upon it,' he continues.

'I hope so, Geoff,' says Mollie ; 'somehow I feel very greedy for presents to-day. It is a bad beginning, for with all my wed-

ding presents, I can hardly expect Christmas ones as well.'

'Well, we will forgive your wish to "grab" everything you see,' sententiously replies Geoffrey, 'in consideration of the fact that you are going to plague some one else in future instead of us.'

After a great deal of fumbling and sundry deep groans on Geoffrey's part, he finally extricates a velvet case from under his pillow, which he presents to Mollie.

'Oh, Geoff, you are a duck!' says Mollie, with a soft flush of pleasure upon her face, making her more than ever like the rose to which Geoffrey has compared her. It is a pet name of his for her.

The case contains a bracelet; the heart at the top has a Christmas rose upon it in quaint old pink topazes and diamonds, with emerald leaves, on which glimmers a diamond fly; round the band is 'Geoff' in

diamond letters ; inside is a lock of Geoffrey's curly hair, and an excellent miniature of himself in uniform ; underneath is engraved the date, and 'Geoff to Mollie,' and these lines by Essex Stuart :

'Only a branch of Christmas Roses,
Of blossoms pink and white ;
Of gems in a winter hedgerow,
Homes of Robin Redbreasts bright.
I love you, oh ! I love you,
Fraught with memories of years,
Of scenes and friends departed,
Veiled by a mist of tears.'

'Take it, my Christmas Rose, also this trimming for your dress of the same flowers,' whispers Geoffrey fondly, 'and with them my love and my blessing.'

With a loving hug, and something uncommonly like tears in her lovely eyes, Mollie departs, and leaves Geoffrey to induct himself into the orthodox garments of an English gentleman on Christmas-day,

with a view to church, and a heavy luncheon afterwards looming in the distance.

What Sir Fitzroy says to Mollie no one knows but their two selves; something pleasant, to judge by Mollie's too expressive face, as, last of all, they enter the dining-room together, just as breakfast begins. On Mollie's finger sparkles a diamond half-hoop, with one of rubies and another of sapphires following it, that certainly were not there the night before.

'Look at Fitzroy's expiring effort in the way of presents,' she says, holding out her slim fingers for Vivienne's inspection. 'It is a combination of Christmas, wedding, and engagement rings that I call very happy; indeed,' Mollie continued, 'I think I may go so far as to say that for once in his life Fitzroy has had an idea that does him infinite credit; but,' she continues severely, 'you must promise me, once for

all, that you will never again commit such an extravagance.'

'Never,' laughs Sir Fitzroy, 'unless I have the misfortune to lose you,' he continues, 'in which case, as the best compliment I could show your memory, I should marry again under three months.'

'If you do, I will leave all I possess to a charity!' exclaims Mollie; 'it is downright heartless, the way in which you view the prospect of my untimely demise!'

'Hurry—hurry, good folks!' says Sir Villiers; 'time's up, the bells are already ringing for church, and the Vicar waiting.'

'Like a sensible man,' observes Mollie, 'he gives us no sermon to-day; instead, he wishes us, from the pulpit, a "Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year," and despatches us home as quickly as may be to make ourselves ill with Christmas fare. I have a moral conviction,' Mollie continues

serenely, 'that unless I sit between Fitzroy and Geoff at dinner and luncheon, they will stuff until they are as fat as the turkey they have been devouring.'

'Nothing of the sort,' answers Geoffrey ; 'and as for your moral, Mollie, if you permit yourself such speeches, I shall conclude that a conviction you may have, but morals you have none, or you would not utter such fibs so calmly.'

'Go and wait in the hall until I am ready, you incorrigible specimen of humanity !' growls Mollie despairingly.

'Avec plaisir, madame,' responds Geoffrey, with a Grandisonian bow, as he opens the door with a flourish for Mollie to pass through.

Accordingly to church they proceed, where, needless to say, they are one and all much edified by the good Vicar's simple but forcible way of putting things, and

they all return to Earlston brimful of good intentions—how they are fulfilled requires more space than is left us to write ; besides, ‘least said, soonest mended.’

So the day draws to its close. They have been to church—they have regaled themselves and their neighbours on all that is most undeniably unwholesome—they have had snap-dragon and bullet-pudding, a bran-pie and a Christmas-tree, and yet they have not had dinner ; all the same, they are utterly and entirely, unmistakably and disgracefully, tired.

About eight, just when the clock—ornamented as it is with holly and mistletoe—thinks it time to strike, Mollie descends the oak staircase, looking, if possible, in her soft tulle dress of Kentish grey, with the goodly trimming of Christmas roses all over it—Geoffrey’s present—more sweet and true than she ever did on that never-to-be-for-

gotten night when she and 'the valet' first made acquaintance.

And Sir Fitzroy thinks so as he meets her at the foot of the stairs, and clasping her in his arms, gives her a fond kiss of perfect peace and satisfaction in the knowledge that she will soon be his own.

Dinner passes off beautifully : they have plum-puddings, with whole trees of holly in their midst, barons of beef, lordly mince-pies, and plenty to wash down the good fare in the form of wine and ale.

Presently the bells are played outside by a real 'band of brothers,' and then they all adjourn to the hall for a real good dance. Sir Fitzroy vales well, so does Mollie ; and the two are a pleasant sight to behold. Everything and everybody seem in a state of delight ; at last the hour is so late that nothing is left but good-nights and recollections of the day they have passed.

‘God bless you, my darling,’ says Geoffrey, on his way to bed, as he kisses Mollie.

‘God keep you, my own,’ adds Sir Fitzroy, as he holds Mollie in a fond embrace when he says good-night at the foot of the staircase.

So ends Mollie’s Christmas-day. Never has she passed so pleasant a time ; and as she goes to her room, with Geoffrey’s bracelets on her arm, her lover’s kisses on her lips, she is all unheeding of dark days to come, while the old Anglo-Norman carol rings out :

‘All you that in this home lie here,
Remember Christ that for us died ;
And spend away with modest cheer
In loving sort this Christmas-tide.’



CHAPTER XII.

MARRIAGE BELLS.

‘Soft eyes looked love to eyes which spoke again,
And all went merry as a marriage bell.’

BYRON : *Childe Harold*.

‘The world well tried, the sweetest thing in life
Is the unclouded welcome of a wife.’

N. P. WILLIS.

It is Mollie's wedding-day. The first of January dawns splendidly. A brilliant sun shines over everything ; it seems as if the elements were graciously disposed to be in a good temper, and to do their best to be agreeable and do honour to Mollie and Sir Fitzroy.

The earth is still fast bound in ice and

snow ; but they only add to the beauty of the fair English landscape. The paths have been swept, and the glittering snow piled into heaps, which makes all the small boys green with envy, that they are not allowed to make snow-men and indulge in a good snowballing of their neighbours and acquaintances. Everywhere is thrown a white cloak, touched here and there by the sun with patches of red and crimson and violet, until it takes all the colours of the rainbow, like some huge chameleon, for the shades vary almost as quickly as they do in that lovely creature.

All is in readiness at the church. The Vicar, assisted by his curate and the bishop, have taken up their places ; the villagers are in a mass inside the church and out, the school-children are lining the path, ready, after the ceremony, to throw baskets

of camellias and violets and Christmas roses in Mollie's path.

The bridesmaids are assembled, so are the guests ; and last, but by no means least, Sir Fitzroy is there, attended by Geoffrey as best man. Very handsome does Sir Fitzroy look ; and he is far less nervous than Geoffrey, who stands holding his friend and future brother's hat in his trembling fingers as if it burnt him.

Everyone knows how truly wretched are the moments spent in church preceding the arrival of the bride. And now that it has come to the day and moment in which his beloved Mollie is to change her character of devoted sister only for that of a loving wife, poor Geoffrey feels genuinely miserable, and though he tries hard to be unselfish, yet in his heart he is tasting in a measure what the disappearance of Mollie's lovely face, winning saucy manners, and

loving ways, will be to him. Earlston without Mollie seems a contradiction of terms, an impossibility.

Meantime, where is Mollie, and what can she be thinking of to keep them all waiting like this? The wedding is fixed for 11.30, and she has not yet arrived. Mollie is safe as yet in the haven of her room, having the last finishing touches put to her toilette by Clifford, her most devoted maid, who has been with her ever since her schoolroom days ; and as she will figure a good deal in Mollie's after-life, it is as well that she should make her first appearance before the audience now. Clifford is one of those extremely rare persons to be found nowadays—almost as rare as the Phoenix, and quite as valuable—who go into one family, and stick, as long as they are in service, to the same people that they have cast their lot in with in early life ; they are

excellent, devoted, trustworthy, and in bad times are, if possible, more unselfish and honest in their devotion to those they serve and care for than they are in bright days. Such servants cannot be too highly appreciated; and if anything happens to part mistresses who possess such treasures as these, they sustain a loss that is almost irreparable. We shall see what Clifford will be in the days that are to come.

Very lovely does our Mollie look in her wedding dress of white satin, the front covered with flounces of old point as fine as a cobweb, and worth a king's ransom; the back is of white velvet, with Christmas roses of pearls all over it; sprigs of real orange-blossoms are in her hair and on her bodice, which is fastened at the throat by a knot of them; the veil which covers her blushing face is of the same priceless lace, fastened with diamond. Christmas

roses, earrings, and a necklace, and bracelet of the same, her lover and father's gifts, and Geoffrey's bracelets, complete her attire. Her huge bouquet is of gardenias, Christmas roses, orange blossoms, myrtle, and tuberose, and scent the whole room. It is an offering from the head-gardener, whose especial favourite Mollie is.

A knock at the door rouses Mollie, and in walks Vivienne, in faultless attire. She is to do mother to the bride.

'Are you ready, darling?' asks Vivienne.

'Yes,' answers Mollie. 'Oh, dear, it is awful!' she sighs. 'Fancy having to face all those people. I know I shall do something awkward—catch my veil as I get out, or put my foot through my flounces. And as for the Patriarch, he has no more idea of his duties than the man in the moon. Do look after him, will you, Vivienne?' says Mollie anxiously; 'for,

in spite of his having done "heavy father," and said, "Bless you, my children!" to four daughters already, his ideas are, and always will be, extremely hazy upon the subject. Before, I looked after him, but I cannot look after him to-day, can I, Vivienne?"

'Certainly not,' says Vivienne, with decision. 'My old man,' as she irreverently designates Norman, 'shall see he does not commit any grave enormities. But,' continues Vivienne, 'if you don't come now we shall be too late for to-day. You must be married before twelve, as you, sensibly, did not spend your money in a special license. Think how dreadful it would look if the newspapers say to-morrow: "The marriage between Sir Fitzroy L'Estrange and Miss Mollie Adair did not take place, in consequence of the bride arriving too late at church." No, darling,

come along and avert such a dire catastrophe, or Fitzroy will sue you for breach of promise.'

So saying, with a fond kiss to the nervous girl, Vivienne succeeded in getting Mollie into the hall, where all the servants whose duties prevented their going to church were assembled to see her; and genuine were they in their exclamations of delight at her appearance.

A few moments more, and the old church was reached. Another instant, and almost before she could realize what was happening, Mollie found herself walking up the aisle, through lines of admirers, and saw, as if in a dream, Geoffrey standing by the altar, and Sir Fitzroy with him.

In an instant the solemn service began. Mollie glanced at Sir Fitzroy, and was reassured by the smile with which he looked at her. Like a dream the seconds passed

to Mollie, and almost before she had recovered herself a ring was slipped upon her finger, and, with a start, she woke up to hear the bishop say solemnly, 'Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder;' and then, 'I pronounce that they be man and wife together.' And as a flood sweeps away all before it, so a torrent of feeling swept over Mollie, and she realized to the full that her past life was gone for ever, that an untried life had become theirs by their wedding to-day.

Soon they were in the vestry. Geoffrey's warm congratulations sounded in Mollie's ears, echoed by those of everyone present. And now Mollie again walks down the aisle, this time on her husband's arm. The organ peals forth the 'Wedding March;' the bells begin to ring; the village children to shout—until it will be a positive mercy, a direct interposition of

Providence, if they ever, any of them, possess a voice again—and to throw showers of fragrant blossom in the path of Mollie and Sir Fitzroy. And so they walk to the carriage, with many an honest word and hearty hand-shake to testify to the love that all, rich and poor alike, bear Mollie.

As Mollie gets into the carriage, she feels that Mollie Adair has disappeared, and in her place reigns Mollie L'Estrange.

At home the welcome is warmer still. And as for the presents, they seem never-ending, for a perfect cart-load of them have arrived since they left for the church.

Of course, they will have to immortalize the day by being photographed in a large group by the photographer from the nearest country town, and the result is remarkable for an entire and praiseworthy absence of

likeness of all the unlucky people there represented.

But such is life ; and being photographed is, like other disagreeable things, best got over quickly.

The usual speeches have been made ; the usual healths proposed and duly honoured ; an extraordinary amount of wedding-cake has been cut by Mollie and distributed ; and the moment has arrived when Mollie must go and put on her travelling-dress.

Away she goes ; Vivienne and her sisters go with her.

In a very few moments Mollie has attired herself in her pretty dress of sapphire blue velvet, trimmed with silver fox. Her sisters each have a few words with her, and then they go downstairs.

‘ Will you fetch Geoff ? ’ says Mollie to Vivienne. ‘ I want to see him alone.’

‘Yes, darling,’ says Vivienne.

‘You will be kind to Geoff and my father until I see them again, won’t you, Vivienne?’ pleads Mollie.

‘Indeed I will!’ answers Vivienne, with a queer little choke in her voice. ‘Now I am off, or I shall make a goose of myself.’

In a few moments Geoffrey enters, and shuts the door softly behind him. He comes up to Mollie, and clasps her in his arms tenderly.

‘Oh, Geoff!’ sobs Mollie, ‘what shall I do without you? How could I ever say I would leave you, whom I love so much?’

‘I know you love me,’ answers Geoffrey, in a voice which he vainly endeavours to render steady, but, somehow, it does not sound the least like his cheery tones; ‘but you were quite right to marry Fitzroy, for I hope, and think, he will make you a good husband. And now, Mollie, you will

have two people to love you instead of only me, and two people you can be the torment of instead of one. That is something, isn't it?' asks Geoffrey, trying to call a smile to Mollie's face, which resembles nothing so much as an April sky, so drowned is it in tears. 'Come, my darling,' he continues, 'you must not give way like this; it is not complimentary to Fitzroy. Be a brave Mollie. Remember, I shall see you again very soon; and I shall be always wanting dinner and luncheon, and tea and supper, while you are in London. You won't get rid of me, that I can promise you.'

As this cheering prospect is unveiled before her eyes, our Mollie graciously consents to be comforted. She dries her eyes, and a faint smile dawns upon her face.

'That is right,' says Geoffrey. 'Now

kiss me, my Christmas rose, and look forward to our next merry meeting.'

Mollie obeys, clinging to Geoffrey as if she could never part with him again. She loves her brother so much—it has been such an exceptional, such an unbroken devotion from their childhood; the days at Earlston have been so marvellously bright and happy, and the clouds have been such passing ones, that Mollie may be fairly excused if she feels keenly leaving her happy home, her beloved father and brother, even for the husband she loves so intensely.

For Mollie does love Sir Fitzroy with every power of her being, and it will be his fault if their marriage is not a happy one.

A rap at the door, and Miss Lamb enters in a state of fuss and a marvellous toilette worthy of the occasion, with the information that the carriage is at the door.

A few words alone with Sir Villiers, and

Mollie appears in the hall. Everyone is armed with rice and slippers, and a fund of energy with which to throw both.

Sir Villiers gives Mollie a loving kiss, and mutters to Sir Fitzroy—

‘Take care of her, and be good to her, my boy.’

‘That I will, sir,’ heartily responds Sir Fitzroy. ‘Mollie shall never repent her marriage.’

Geoffrey is standing by Vivienne, with something that is suspiciously like a tear glistening on his long lashes. He gives Mollie his arm, puts her into the carriage, and bestows upon her a final embrace. The wheels go round; an avalanche of rice and slippers descends upon the carriage, and hits Sir Fitzroy in the eye; and, amidst a torrent of cheers and good wishes, they are off, on the first stage of the journey which, be it long or short, Sir Fitzroy and Mollie have undertaken to travel together.



CHAPTER XIII.

FATED TO MEET.

‘In a moment, thought Geraint,

“Here, by God’s rood, is the one maid for me.”’

TENNYSON.

‘We never go to meet, of set purpose, the important things of this life. We turn suddenly round a corner and come upon them all at once.’

A soft brilliant day in May. The scene is St. James’s Street, about half-past two, upon the Birthday Drawing-room day. All the club windows are full of gentlemen, assembled to pass judgment upon the horses and carriages and the beauty of the ladies who occupy them.

At a foot’s-pace the carriages with their

Mollie
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as compared with the quality of public
houses. St. James's Street is crowded;
so is the Park. It is a veritable ball
room.

'Good turn-out, that,' says Arthur
Maudsley, pointing to a single hansom,
with a pair of magnificent thorough-bred
horses, matched to a hair, that is slowly
proceeding down the street.

'Should think it was,' answers Jack
Bateman. 'They belong to the Duke of
Morton; I bought them for him myself
and untold trouble I took before
I got them to my liking.'

And the well-known

on his heels

over his

is

of her

bility of finding good horses, even ~~when~~
backed by unlimited money.

He is speedily joined by Charley ~~and~~ ^{the}
mour, whose courteous manners and ~~the~~ ^{y.}
ing, good-natured face are welcome ~~to him~~ ^{man.}
ever he goes, and whose height ~~renders~~ ^{Charley}
crowd a matter of indifference to him, ^{married}
by Sir Lowry Wood, whose ~~handsome~~ ^{'Lady}
winning manners, cheery voice, and
clasp of the hand, have made him a
justly popular member in the ^{age turns into}
world called 'London Society' and Sir Fitzroy.
at relations, Vivi-

For some time the ~~little~~ ^{Byron says :}
'all and sundry' who

'Y ^{length people's wooings,}
^{of marriages.'}

rich ^{, in most instances there}
we ^{to say, that a bust simply}
can be said upon the subject
recommending it is concerned.
and Sir Fitzroy are an exception

fair occupants run the gauntlet of public opinion. St. James's Street is crammed ; so is the Park. It is a wonderfully full Drawing-room.

' Good turn-out, that,' says Arthur Maudesley, pointing to a single brougham, with a pair of magnificent, thorough-bred roans, matched to a hair, that is slowly proceeding down the street.

' Should think it was,' answers Jack Bateman. ' They belong to the Duke of Morton ; I bought them for him myself, and untold trouble I took before I could match them to my liking.'

And the well-known judge of horses turns upon his heels, pushes his hat still further over his good, kind eyes, and with his hands in his pockets saunters out of the club and into the Park, there to hold forth again to a justly admiring audience of the iniquities of horse-dealers, and the general impossi-

bility of finding good horses, even when backed by unlimited money.

He is speedily joined by Charley Seymour, whose courteous manners and beaming, good-natured face are welcome wherever he goes, and whose height renders a crowd a matter of indifference to him; and by Sir Lowry Wood, whose handsome face, winning manners, cheery voice, and honest clasp of the hand, have made him the most justly popular member in that capricious world called 'London Society.'

For some time the little group discusses 'all and sundry' who are passing by.

'Ye gods!' exclaims Sir Lowry, with a rich Hibernian accent, 'what a fearful old woman! let us hope that she has never made an honest man of any member of my misguided sex, and that, consequently, children she has none.'

'I'll bet you what you like,' says Jack

Bateman, 'that her children can say, with Wordsworth's little maid, "We are seven." These sort of women, in spite of their ugliness and general undesirableness, invariably have large fortunes; consequently they marry, and equally without hesitation they have numerous "branches of peace."' "

'What do you mean?' inquires Charley Seymour innocently.

'Why, children, you benighted individual!' responds Arthur Maudesley. 'What ever will you ask next? you must have been taken away from school years too early, to judge by the marvellous and most lamentable want of knowledge that you invariably display. Do try and improve, old fellow,' he continues; 'if it were not for your ignorance, you would be quite endurable.'

'You will have to put up with that,' laughingly answers Charley Seymour. 'A truce to chaff; we are here to admire our

friends' wives—indeed, I may say “their sisters and their cousins and their aunts.”

Let us to business.’

‘I hear that Fitzroy L’Estrange’s wife is quite beautiful,’ says Arthur Maudesley.

‘Who was she?’ inquires Jack Bateman.

‘Miss Mollie Adair,’ responds Charley Seymour. ‘They have only been married four months,’ he continues; ‘Lady L’Estrange is presented to-day.’

Even as he speaks a carriage turns into the Park; in it are Mollie and Sir Fitzroy. Sir Fitzroy being without relations, Vivienne is to present Mollie. Byron says:

‘Romances paint at full length people’s wooings,
But only give a bust of marriages.’

And he is right; in most instances there is so little good to say, that a bust simply covers all that can be said upon the subject as far as recommending it is concerned. But Mollie and Sir Fitzroy are an exception

to the rule. The four months that have passed have been 'golden hours' to our Mollie, made so by the devoted love and care of her husband for her.

Sir Fitzroy was Mollie's one love, the only man she had ever bestowed a thought upon; consequently, in her case the chains of matrimony were gloried in and most lovingly worn. She loved her husband devotedly, and up to now the horizon of their domestic peace was perfectly unclouded. No wonder, therefore, that Mollie looked radiant and bewitching in her lovely dress, with Sir Fitzroy by her side, on her way to join Vivienne at Buckingham Palace.

'Heavens! what a lovely face!' says Sir Lowry, as the carriage comes to a standstill close to where he and his friends are staying.

Mollie becomes rosy red; she has overheard the honest and outspoken tribute to

her charms, and she sinks back further among the soft cushions. Sir Fitzroy has his head out of the other window, and is inwardly wondering how much longer they will be kept in the same place.

‘That is Lady L’Estrange,’ whispers Jack Bateman; ‘you see, I did not speak more than the truth—I certainly did not exaggerate—when I told you boys the other day that she is the best-looking woman I have seen for many a summer’s day.’

‘Exaggerate! I should think not,’ replies Sir Lowry. ‘Why, you did not half do her justice; she is simply lovely!’

‘And as good as she is lovely!’ warmly responds Jack Bateman. ‘I have known her since she was a scrap in short petticoats, and she is my standard of all that a good, true woman ought to be.’

By this time the carriage with Mollie

and Sir Fitzroy has arrived at its destination..

‘Ah, Fitzroy,’ whispers Mollie, ‘I am so frightened; supposing I do something dreadful—fall backwards over my train or kiss the Queen’s cheek instead of her hand, or give my card to the wrong man, or never find Vivienne? Oh!’ continues Mollie, with a heartfelt groan, ‘if I had ever thought about being presented, nothing, Fitzroy—now mind, nothing—would have induced me to marry you.’

‘Are you quite sure of that, Mollie?’ asks Sir Fitzroy, with a twinkle in his eyes.

‘Quite,’ answers Mollie, with exceeding dignity.

‘Then I am very glad,’ answers Sir Fitzroy, ‘although it is a compliment that perhaps I ought not to pay you, that you did not know you would have to be pre-

sented, or I should never have won my wife; and somehow,' he continues fondly, 'I don't think I could have done without my wife.'

A grateful, radiant look is all Mollie's answer. At this moment they meet Vivienne, who, with her usual calmness, looks upon drawing-rooms and their attendant necessary folly as matters not even worthy of a second thought. To look at her, you would think that she had been in the habit of going to one every day regularly since she married, so perfectly indifferent is she.

'Well, Mollie, you are beautiful,' she says, when Mollie arrives in the room in which she has taken a seat, armed with good temper and patience.

'Am I?' answers humble Mollie. 'So Fitzroy says. I am so very glad you both approve.'

'Of course we do, my dear,' replies

Vivienne briskly. 'You always look well.'

'Between you I shall be quite spoilt,' answers Mollie, with a fond look at her husband, which has a reflected glory for her cousin.

By this time they have arrived in the ante-room of the Presence-Chamber, in which the Queen receives her true and most loyal subjects. Vivienne's train is let down, and lies on the ground in all its glory, as she proceeds slowly into the presence of Her Majesty, with frightened Mollie behind her, who wonders more and more at each step how she is going to get through this terrible ordeal. And then, before she can really realize her position, Mollie's train is let down also, in all its length and beauty. She presents her card to the Lord-Chamberlain, and, like one in a dream, she hears :

'Lady L'Estrange, on her marriage, by

Mrs. Keene Standish ;' and she becomes conscious of a hand held out for her to kiss, and of the smiling face of the most gracious Lady in the land, as she courtesies low, and kisses her Majesty's hand ; and then of the sweet face of our dear Princess of Wales, the loveliest lady in all England, and, after her, of the rest of the Royal Family.

And so, almost before she can believe that it is begun, the dread ordeal is over, and Lady L'Estrange is once more free to join her husband, who, having already been to a *levée*, is waiting for her outside.

As Mollie is just getting safely out of the Presence-Chamber, some one behind her steps upon her dress with such force that she is nearly dragged backwards. How, or why, she never knows, but she lets her bouquet and fan fall, and the latter is broken into pieces. In a second, a most polite officer steps from his place, and,

with a bow, returns the missing things to her.

Mollie looks up at him with a grateful glance from her great blue eyes. With a few shy words of thanks she passes on to join Sir Fitzroy and Vivienne; but in the glance she has given the courteous stranger, Mollie has had time to acknowledge that her eyes have this day for the first time seen the most winning, the truest, the handsomest face she has ever beheld, Sir Fitzroy and Geoffrey not excepted.

‘By Jove!’ says Sir Fitzroy, as Mollie joins him, ‘you are the worse for the fray. Your fan is in scraps—ground almost to powder. Who was the officer?’ continues Sir Fitzroy. ‘He was a good-looking fellow.’

Mollie and Vivienne answer that they do not know who the gentleman may be; and it so happens that at this particular moment

there is no one near of their mutual acquaintance from whom they can ask for and obtain the desired information.

So Mollie, Sir Fitzroy, and Vivienne wend their way slowly downstairs to where, after a long waiting, they finally find their carriages.

Thus ends Mollie's presentation.

The officer who rendered Mollie the slight service stands gazing after her as she disappears, like a man in a dream.

'That is the loveliest woman I have ever seen in my life,' he exclaims to the man standing next to him. 'Can you tell me who that lady is?' he continued.

'Where?' says the individual addressed, who, with the usual denseness and perversity of his charming sex, never sees the person or thing he is wanted to. 'There may be only one woman in the world for you,' he continues to his friend; 'but it

appears to me that there are some hundreds about here now. They are packed as tight as herrings in a barrel, and will, I should think, come out as flat, after all this jostling and squeezing, as that unhappy fish; and I am bound, without prejudice, to confess that they are about as ugly a collection as I have ever seen congregate together, even at a Birthday Drawing-room.'

The speaker is a young gentleman of about twenty summers, with an eye-glass, which he does not want, stuck in his eye—but 'there, it is the fashion, you know'—and the uniform of her Majesty's British Grenadiers adorning his lovely figure.

'That is your opinion, is it?' rejoins his companion-in-arms sarcastically. 'You have had so much experience.'

'Quite enough,' says the youngster, 'to enable me to know a good-looking woman when I see one. Now, there is the best-

looking woman in the room,' pointing with his finger to Mollie's retreating form.

'Why, that is the lady I am asking you about,' answers the first speaker.

'Now I no longer marvel at your madness,' responds the sweet youth. 'Why, that is Lady L'Estrange, Fitzroy L'Estrange's wife; she has just been presented. She is lovely enough to turn the heads of all London.'

'That she is,' answers the officer; 'and she will, unless I am much mistaken. So that is Fitzroy L'Estrange's wife,' mutters the officer to himself. 'What a face! how lovely! how pure! He should be good to such a wife as that, and true to her; and I hope he will be both.'

By which it will be seen that our gallant son of Mars has grave doubts upon the subject; and though to Mollie her husband is perfect, his character among men is that

of a flirt, of a selfish man, whose affections no one woman has yet succeeded in retaining.

Will Mollie be able to succeed where others have signally failed ?

So wondering, the officer turns sadly and gravely away on his way to barracks.



CHAPTER XIV.

BIRTH OF ROBIN.

‘Fragile beginnings of a mighty end.’

HON. MRS. NORTON.

‘The mother in her office holds the key of the soul.’

Old Play.

SIR FITZROY had sold out after his marriage, and he had been lucky enough to get into partnership with a firm of stockbrokers in the City, so that, though very poor, he and Mollie could just manage to get along. Their establishment was very small. The faithful Clifford looked after everything and everybody, no easy task, as Sir Fitzroy had always been accustomed to have the best of everything, upon ‘nothing a year,

paid quarterly,' and the economies now necessary did not please him at all. He liked a good dinner, and that is not an easy matter to obtain when money is scarce and cooks extravagant. Also Sir Fitzroy was, being a man, by no means free from faults, and often Mollie dreaded the time when dinner caused a break in the evening. Some days all would go well ; others, again, nothing was right ; and the cook who could give satisfaction to Sir Fitzroy might take any situation in the world.

In spite of this and sundry other domestic worries, Mollie was, if possible, more in love with her husband than ever, and he still seemed very fond of her. They had taken a pretty little house at Chiselhurst, and Sir Fitzroy used to go up and down to his work.

So little of London had they had, that the chances of Mollie developing into a

professional beauty had become beautifully less. Best so, in every way !

Mollie's days were passed in reading and writing, painting, playing, working; for hers was one of those characters that could not be idle, that must be constantly employed.

'Quiet to quick spirits is a hell;' so such an existence would have proved to her, and although her life was quiet in one sense of the word, yet in another it was very much the reverse. She and Sir Fitzroy had spent part of the summer at Earlston, and Mollie had revelled at finding herself once more in her dear old familiar haunts. Geoffrey had passed some time at the Red Cottage, the name of Mollie and Fitzroy's abode, and with his bright presence Mollie had gained the only thing that her happiness lacked, that could be said in any way to be wanting to her perfect contentment—her

beloved Geoffrey : what would she do without him ? With such a brother and such a husband, what more could heart desire ? Only one thing, one treasure, and that, please God, would soon be hers—namely, a little child, to crown her peace and happiness with its presence and innocence.

Days passed quickly into months, and they in their turn gave way to others ; soon Mollie will have been married more than a year. All is in readiness at the Red Cottage for the advent of the longed-for baby. Mollie has elected to remain at her country house, far preferring it to the noise and bustle of London. The nurse is engaged, and a wonderful ‘trousseau’ has been prepared chiefly by Mollie’s deft fingers.

The winter has begun ; Christmas has passed and gone at Earlstown ; Mollie and Fitzroy have been there. What an odd contrast it seems to a few months ago !

They have returned to the Red Cottage, and the soft summer-time is coming round again with its cargo of joy and sorrow, its message of tumult and rest.

When the anniversary of the day dawns on which Mollie was presented, Mollie becomes a mother, and the gift of a lovely, living son is placed in her expectant arms. Long hours does Mollie lie awake gazing at her baby, and thinking, with that fond holy 'mother love,' the like of which is never approached by any other human affection—not even that of a devoted wife for her husband—of the marvellous gift that God in His goodness has seen fit to grant her, a glorious ending to all she has gone through.

'Are you pleased with our boy?' Mollie asks her husband.

'Indeed I am,' answers Fitzroy, 'although to me all babies seem alike.'

‘Oh, Fitzroy! how can you say so?’ exclaims Mollie, roused into a state of indignation at this doubtful appreciation of her son’s charms; ‘you are no judge of babies. Ours is not an ordinary child; why, Mrs. Græme says he is as big as two ordinary babies.’

‘No doubt you and Mrs. Græme are right,’ blandly assents Sir Fitzroy. ‘As long as you are pleased, my queen, so am I.’ And Sir Fitzroy stoops and kisses Mollie’s pale cheeks. ‘All you have got to do at present,’ he continues, ‘is to get well as fast as ever you can.’

‘Very well,’ answers Mollie; and with a renewal of her old mischief, she adds: ‘With you to torment me, my speedy recovery is assured.’

‘Go to sleep,’ answers Sir Fitzroy, holding up a warning hand; finding himself worsted in the encounter, he thinks pru-

dence is the better part of valour, and beats a hasty retreat.

Two days after the birth of Mollie's son, a gentleman seated at breakfast in his club reads the announcement in the *Morning Post*. For a long time after he sits lost to all outward influences; at last, rousing himself with an effort, he walks out of the club. He is the officer who picked up Mollie's bouquet and fan at the drawing-room, and who then, for the first time, saw her lovely face, and remembered it always.

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